

Policies, Work, and Community: Why Idaho Farmworkers Choose to Stay

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Abstract

Idaho's agricultural industries depend on Mexican and Mexican-American farmworkers for labor to maintain farms, crops, and livestock. Despite their important role in Idaho's economy, many farmworkers are undocumented and live with the fear of deportation. This study explores Idaho's Latino migration patterns since the railroad companies recruited Mexican immigrants in the early 1900s through today's Mexican population residing in Idaho. Overall, this paper strives to explain why undocumented immigrants are planning to remain in the U.S. permanently. In an effort to collect data and understand, a survey was administered in Spanish to 102 seasonal farmworkers who had a residency of more than two years in Idaho. The study finds that 83% of undocumented immigrants would remain in the United States rather than return to Mexico. In a previous study (2003), Wampler et al. found that 52% of undocumented immigrants preferred to stay. The percentage increase will be explained through social factors, rather than economic. Ultimately, this research hopes to inform on the large undocumented Latino population. It is pivotal for Idaho's lawmakers to make adequate policy implementations to keep a population that has always been crucial to the economic growth of the Gem State. Keywords: Farmworkers, Idaho, Immigration

Immigration from Latin America and the population growth of Latinos in the United States (U.S.) has become one of the most controversial and important developments of recent U.S. history. The Latino population has expanded from 6 million in the 1960s (3.4% of the U.S. population at the time) to currently well over 50 million (16% of the nation's population). Now, after years of rapid Latino population growth, the number of immigrants in the U.S. has stabilized. It is well known immigrants often migrate due to the lack of economic and social opportunities in their countries. Immigrants are more than willing to enter the U.S. with, or without, proper documentation for better economic and social opportunities.

Now, with millions of Latino immigrants in the U.S., are immigrants planning to stay in the U.S.? Or, are immigrants only seeking a short economic advantage? Immigrants from other countries face numerous disadvantages when entering the U.S., especially those without proper documentation. Undocumented immigrants accept high risk to live in the U.S. in order to live a better life, and they fear they will be deported. This paper strives to explain why immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, are planning to remain in the U.S. permanently. To determine why undocumented immigrants are planning to remain in the U.S., I conducted a survey of 102 seasonal Mexican farmworkers in Idaho to find indications why most are willing to remain permanently, rather than stay temporarily. More than two-thirds of the respondents lacked documentation and a majority of the respondents were women.

Literature Review

A Pew Research study found that six states, including Idaho, accounted for at least 60% of undocumented populations, which has increased due to labor demands. This study found that 83% of the undocumented respondents planned to stay permanently in the U.S. Many of these undocumented immigrants in Idaho are working jobs that require hard physical labor for low wages. Although immigrants may have better economic and social opportunities in the U.S., I argue immigrants are staying for plenty of reasons other than economic opportunities. Immigrants are likely to stay due to social responsibilities they have with their employers, children, and their families.

With this in mind, my study follows the historical to contemporary migration patterns of Mexican migration into Idaho, while assessing how immigration policies have kept many immigrants from returning home, therefore, keeping immigrants in the U.S. My study also observes their responses from their demographic background, migratory patterns, and through their social characteristics. Although, they are separate from family members in Mexico, through a survey, I further analyze the three independent variables on Idaho's undocumented Mexican farmworkers to determine why such a large percentage of undocumented immigrants choose to stay in the U.S. Three independent variables have been taken into account when measuring why undocumented immigrants are planning to stay.

The first variable is the number of years the undocumented immigrant has been in the U.S. Those who have been here longer are more likely to have settled due to social connections within the community. The second variable is undocumented immigrants with children in the U.S. I hypothesize if parents have children in the U.S., they will be more likely to stay in order for their children to have access to opportunities. For my last variable, I propose that if the undocumented immigrant is married, then it is more likely they will stay because it is easier to emotionally disconnect from ties back in Mexico and financially stabilize oneself in the U.S.

Idaho's Latino Migration

Idaho's Latino population has increased dramatically. Most of the state's growth is attributed to immigration. Latinos are the state's largest ethnic minority with Mexican and Mexican-Americans making up a majority of the Latinos in Idaho. The growth of the state's foreign-born population has accelerated in recent years. For the past 30 years, Idaho's Hispanic population has doubled due to Idaho's economic growth in the past quarter century. However, the Latino presence has been in Idaho at least from the 1860s, and ever since has played an important role in the state's development.

Presumably, Latinos began arriving to Idaho in the 1800s. With news in the 1860s that gold was discovered, Latinos migrated north to seek fortune. The Latinos who migrated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought practical knowledge and technical experience that was crucial to the development of Idaho's frontier in the growing railroad industry. The railroad drew in thousands of Latinos to Idaho. Historian Erasmo Gamboa explains that Pocatello was a primary site where railroad companies hired Mexican immigrants. The work Mexicans did for the railroad industries contributed greatly to the agricultural and livestock economy success. The railroads built by a majority of Mexicans were used to deliver agricultural and livestock products around the nation. Before long, Idaho began expanding economically, due to the agricultural and livestock industry.

Idaho's growing economy in the 1870s required large amounts of labor for the mines. In the beginning, Chinese immigrants were recruited for the manual labor. However, with concerns about new immigrants arising, the National Origin Restriction (or Quota Acts) in 1921 became the first major restriction on immigration in the U.S.. When the U.S. entered World War I, Congress closed the door to European and Asian immigrants and Idaho's expanding economy now required a new labor market. Labor agents turned to recruit Mexican immigrants to work for the railroad, sugar beet farms, and companies in Idaho. Ever since, Idaho's economy has benefited tremendously from the hard labor of immigrant Mexican workers.

As early as 1942, the first major waves of Mexican immigrants were recruited for farm labor in Idaho through the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was a bilateral agreement between Mexico and the U.S., which supported mutual interests of both parties. The Bracero Program fulfilled labor needs in the U.S., while relieving the pressure of Mexico's citizens seeking wages. It is known that various farmers throughout Idaho petitioned for Mexican farmworkers to come work the fields. Mexican braceros all worked under exploited conditions for the opportunity to earn money; however, it was the farmers and Idaho's economy who benefited immensely, while braceros earned low wages. Even after the Bracero Program ended, the labor Mexicans provided in Idaho helped make the Gem State what it is today, and farmworkers continue to do so.

Again, in the 1980s, the U.S.'s desperate need for labor finally led to comprehensive measures to act despite economic distress, recurrent inflation, and stagnating wages. To decrease migration flows and find a solution to the labor shortage, Congress passed legislation on the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986. IRCA contained four separate provisions: increased Border Patrol along the Mexico-U.S. border; sanctions on U.S. employers who knowingly hired unauthorized workers; an opportunity for undocumented workers to apply and gain status if they met mandated requirements; and lastly, a pathway to legal residency for agricultural workers. IRCA has been called "the most sweeping revision of the nation's immigration laws since 1965." When IRCA was enacted, it became a vital change in immigration law. IRCA was not only enacted with border relations with Mexico in mind, it influenced immigration from other countries as well. However, it is Mexicans that received a greater

impact from it. Seventy percent of Mexicans were granted amnesty, and 80% of those legalized were farmworkers, including Mexican farmworkers in Idaho.

Not only were Mexican immigrants recruited, or given amnesty to fulfill a labor need, but there were causal factors that pushed Mexicans to migrate to the U.S. Poverty and low wages in Mexico left many Mexicans without a choice but to migrate north. U.S.-Mexico trade agreements did not help the situation either. When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, Mexico, and the U.S. came into effect, it opened borders and eliminated tariffs on exported and imported products. Many U.S. companies outsourced to Mexico, and this affected the agricultural sector in Mexico. Farmers and their workers were now struggling to make ends meet. Many Mexican citizens were unemployed and had no income, which became a major reason why we saw an influx of Mexicans migrating north in the 1990s.

Many the Mexicans who came to Idaho were from families of rural backgrounds with little to no experience other than farming. Because Idaho provided work opportunities with little to no experience, out of a need of desperation to live, Mexicans migrants began working. Historian Errol Jones states, "Once farmworkers embarked on a migrant way of life, it was almost impossible to escape." As immigrants settled, they would form community. In Massey's research, he finds that being an immigrant in the U.S. had impacts on their lives. As their wages increased so did their living standards. Although many immigrants were still living in poverty, the challenge of adapting in the U.S. became a continuous routine, and immigrants learned to adapt and form communities amongst each other.

Today, we continue to see Mexican immigrants working Idaho's agricultural industries. Immigrants are needed for all the various agricultural work in Idaho. There is work in potato fields, onion fields, bean fields, etc. Over time, we see how Idaho's desperate agricultural needs increased the Latino population. With border enforcement making it impossible to return and come as needed, most immigrants never returned and soon developed a life in the U.S. In Idaho specifically, the Latino population has expanded tremendously over the decades, and continues to grow. See Table 1 for the Latino population growth.

Remaining permanently in the United States

With push-pull factors and the Latino population increasing, it is evident thousands of immigrants have migrated north and are living in the U.S. even if they are undocumented. Although language barriers and lack of documentation makes it difficult to live in the U.S., many immigrants have learned to adapt to life here with inter Latino communities and are now choosing to stay in the U.S. permanently as long as they are not deported. The following three hypotheses explain why immigrants are now more than ever establishing into U.S. society. These hypotheses are directed specifically to explain why undocumented immigrants from Mexico are more likely to remain permanently in the U.S.

Hypothesis 1. Undocumented immigrants who migrated prior to the 2000s are more likely to want to remain permanently in the U.S. I argue immigrants who came to the U.S. prior to the 2000s will indicate a higher percentage of wanting to stay in the U.S. than those who came after the 2000s. It is more likely for immigrants who have spent more years in the U.S. to have a more established life surrounded by work and family. In addition, they are more likely to integrate themselves into the community by attending local events or being involved. Wampler et al. finds when immigrants start staying and adjusting to life in the U.S., the immigrants are building new social ties and cutting ties with individuals from back home. It is evident immigrants would cut social ties back in Mexico because of the risks of going and returning, especially if the immigrant is undocumented. Immigration policies may have increased border security, and although it has kept immigrants out of the U.S., the millions who are already in the U.S. are here with grounded roots. Immigrants who have been here for more than 16 years most likely have homes, children in schools, secure jobs, and overall, they have found the opportunity to live a better life.

Hypothesis 2. Undocumented immigrants who have children in the U.S. are more likely to want to remain permanently in the U.S. I hypothesize that Mexican immigrants with children in the U.S. are more likely to remain in the U.S. than immigrants without children. Whether the children are born in the U.S. or brought over, those children are fully integrated into American culture. They learn English, go to schools, become involved. Once the parent has made the decision to remain in the U.S., the child will fully immerse into society. These children are more likely to integrate into developing their life in the U.S. than their parents. For many children, this is the only country they have lived in. Mexican immigrant parents are more willing to remain permanently in the U.S. in order for their children to have a promising future with access to education and jobs. Even the Migration Policy Institute finds that

an overwhelming majority of parents (70%) who have children under 18 say it is unlikely that their children would want to live in their country of origin. In addition, in Idaho alone, the number of children with at least one immigrant parent has increased from 1990 to 2013 from 17,000 to 61,000 children. Although immigrants work low wage jobs, the life they provide here for their children is often far better than the life they grew up with.

Hypothesis 3. Undocumented immigrants who are married are more likely to remain permanently in the U.S. For my third hypothesis, I predict immigrants who are married will more likely stay in the U.S. because marriage is a partnership—an emotional, economic, social partnership. Having someone to share a life with can make it easier to cope with living in the U.S. while being far away from family members back in Mexico. Also married immigrant couples are more likely to consolidate economic and social responsibilities. Together the couple has a higher chance of securing a home and overall increasing their capital. They are more likely to integrate into the community and attend gatherings or events, build new social ties. Although Hispanics have high rates of never marrying, it is more likely for immigrants who are married to want to remain in the U.S. because being able to unify economic and social responsibilities overall builds a stronger self-fulfilling desire to better their life as well as their partner’s and children’s lives in the U.S.

Data and Methods

The hypotheses emerged from a previous study on Idaho’s undocumented Latino population. A previous study conducted by Maria Chavez and Brian Wampler in 2003 on 492 Mexican farmworkers from three counties in Idaho with large concentrations of migrant seasonal farmworkers focuses on why Mexican immigrants are choosing to remain permanently in the U.S. The study gathered survey participants who were young single men. This article focuses on women and families to better explain why they are more likely to remain permanently in the U.S. The data was collected through a survey administered in Spanish from June to July in 2015 to 102 seasonal farmworkers who had a residency of more than two years in Idaho. The survey documented questions on demographic information, work-related questions, migration history, social/acculturation patterns, and their political knowledge.

The survey interviews are not entirely representative of Idaho’s larger Hispanic population. Idaho’s estimated migrant and seasonal population is 26,771 agricultural workers. The surveys were collected in rural agricultural communities, spreading from Western to Eastern Idaho—all randomly selected where the population works, lives, and spends their social time. Before implementing the survey, it was assumed a majority would either be of Mexican nationality or Mexican-American and Spanish speaking. The survey respondents would have the option to respond to the survey in either Spanish or English.

It was necessary to locate members of this community by utilizing methods and techniques that might more easily identify potential members of the targeted community. Settings were sought where this community is most likely to be concentrated, such as labor camps (housing projects), neighborhoods with high known concentrations of Mexican and/or Mexican-Americans, trailer parks, Mexican-owned businesses, food drives, and Spanish-language church services. The following surveys were primarily gathered from two counties in Idaho: Canyon County (Western Idaho) and Fremont County (Eastern Idaho).

Participants

Canyon County is generally known as a top county where farm laborers reside. Canyon County is home to Farmway Village, a housing project run by the Caldwell Housing Authority opened in 1940. Farmway Village houses many Mexican residents who work in the fields or in agricultural industries. As for Fremont County, most immigrants reside in compact trailer parks throughout the county. Although Fremont County’s Hispanic population is relatively low, there is a high majority of them working in the fields and agricultural warehouses. Table 2 compares the Latino population of Canyon County and Fremont County.

In order to determine the undocumented population, respondents were asked the following question: “Are you a US Citizen, permanent resident, temporary worker, or other?” This question is highly sensitive because it addresses legal concerns; if respondents did not want to respond, they were not pressured for an answer. For the purpose of the study, those who answered U.S. Citizen, permanent resident, and temporary worker were taken out, and the respondents that answered ‘other’ will be over served as ‘undocumented.’ Wampler et al. used similar methods when analyzing why Mexican immigrants choose to remain permanently in the U.S.

Findings

Immigrants from Mexico often migrate to the U.S. for economic purposes, but what is keeping them here is far greater than economic gains. Through the following analysis, I determine why undocumented immigrants, specifically those in Idaho, are indicating they would like to remain in the U.S. permanently.

Out of the 102 Mexican and Mexican-American immigrants surveyed, 71 of the participants were undocumented. Sixty-two percent of the undocumented participants were women and 38% were male. Using descriptive analysis, we explain why undocumented immigrants are choosing to settle in the U.S., likely due to the following factors: the year of migration to the U.S., having children in the U.S., and marital status. The survey for this study was directed towards seasonal farmworkers who had at least two years residency in Idaho. In comparison, Wampler et al. surveyed younger migrant seasonal farmworkers. We can assume they have settled more permanently over time causing them to choose to remain in the U.S.

In total, 83% of undocumented seasonal farmworkers indicated they would remain in the U.S. rather than return to Mexico. Wampler et al. found only 52% of undocumented migrant seasonal farmworkers wanted to remain in the U.S.. I argue the change in percentages of undocumented immigrants expressing interest in staying is due to three factors: the year of migration to the U.S., having children in the U.S., and marital status.

The longer the undocumented immigrant has stayed in the U.S., the more likely they are to settle permanently and gain access to knowledge, assistance, and other resources that help them with their social status. The reason that respondents have decided to stay is because they have greater social responsibilities, connections and ties to local communities, and a greater sense of belonging, which increases if they have family in the U.S. The undocumented immigrants who came from the year 2000-2009 are 72% sure they are remaining in the U.S. For those who arrived between the years of 1990-1999, 93.1% state that they want to remain in the U.S. Lastly, immigrants who came from 1980-1989 are 100% sure they are staying in the U.S. The longer the immigrant has stayed, the more their attitude towards staying increases. Although most undocumented immigrants are more likely to remain in the U.S., the increases in percentages show the longer immigrants are staying, the more likely they are to develop roots. We find immigrants with less than 10 years in the U.S. are more likely to return to Mexico. Within time, immigrants establish their life around work, family, and local institutions.

Having children in the U.S. contributes as a factor why undocumented immigrants are expressing interest in staying. Out of the undocumented survey respondents, 82% of the parents indicated their children was a major reason they plan to remain in the U.S. permanently. These parents have their children enrolled in schools. Eighty-four percent have children in grade levels K-12. Even undocumented parents whose children are not yet enrolled in school are 78% sure they are to remain in the U.S. It is evident immigrants are more likely to stay for their children to gain an easier access to opportunities whether that be through education or a job. Undocumented parents are expressing their willingness to stay, because this is the life their children become accustomed to as the years go by.

Being married, compared to being single or separated, doubles the chance of those expressing interest to remain in the U.S. The reason married individuals are more likely to stay includes joint economic resources, greater joint support, and they are more likely to get involved in the community and create social ties with others. For the undocumented immigrants who stated they were either single or separated, 33% indicated they plan to stay in the U.S. permanently. However, in contrast to married couple, 66% indicated they plan to remain in the U.S. permanently. The percentage doubled, and therefore, I conclude having stronger family ties will keep the undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Individuals who settle with families are more likely to develop stronger roots, emotionally, socially, and economically.

Gender findings. Previous research states that women express a strong interest in living in the U.S. Wampler et al. confirmed 77% of women indicated they had a strong interest to remain in the U.S. The confirmation remains accurate with a slight increase to 83% of women expressing interests in remaining in the U.S. However, Wampler et al. found only 45% of undocumented men planned to stay. In comparison, this study found 81% of undocumented men expressing interest in staying in the U.S. The male gender gap has closed significantly. We explain this through the means of children. The increase in why males are showing stronger interest can be due to having children here. Of the 45% of men who planned to stay 30% did not have children. In contrast, of the 81% of men planning to stay, 12% did not have children. Male and female parents with children are more likely to choose to stay in the U.S. Because respondents were seasonal farmworkers, they are settling down with families and their children are integrating into society. Gender is a predominant factor and plays a role why immigrants are choosing to stay.

Conclusion

Immigrants have motives to remain in the U.S.; they are staying because of the social responsibilities they have cultivated in the U.S. We find gender greatly influences whether immigrants are likely to stay permanently. In previous studies women majorly influence if they stay or not, but now, if men have children, they are just as likely to stay. From the survey study on the immigrant population, I found undocumented immigrants are indicating to stay depending on the number of years they have been in the U.S., if they have children, or if they are married. To be sure, there are more social factors to consider why undocumented immigrants are choosing to stay; however, for this survey, I find that the undocumented population in Idaho is willing to stay for reasons other than economic ones.

Although recent findings indicate that the number of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the U.S. has decreased from 6.9 to 5.6 million over the seven year period from 2007 in 2014, Mexicans still make up half of the undocumented population. A decrease in Mexican immigration could be due, in part, to border enforcement increases, deportations and/or family separations, causing whole families to migrate back to Mexico. Even though a large number of immigrants have migrated back, immigrants have formed their lives in the U.S. The many respondents I surveyed and communicated with indicated they are willing to stay in the U.S. permanently, but also expressed living with the constant fear of deportation and being separated from their immediate family.

It is vital that Idahoans address the undocumented population. Idaho is one of the highest-ranking states in terms of unauthorized immigrants, yet the undocumented population continues to increase. Idaho's large farming and construction industries draw undocumented immigrants for job opportunities to make economic gains, but according to this research study we find that many of the undocumented population in Idaho are now choosing to stay in the U.S. permanently, rather than temporarily. With a large undocumented Latino population, it is key for Idaho's government to make adequate policy implementations to keep a population that is and has always been crucial to the economic growth of the Gem State.

Another Pew Research Center study shows Idaho has the largest share of unauthorized immigrants to be impacted by the delay of President Obama's executive action. Although Idaho's unauthorized immigrants are numerically small compared to most states, 46% of about 50,000 undocumented residents are eligible for deportation protection; the highest among all states. When asking undocumented immigrants if they were eligible for President Obama's executive action, 86% responded that they would qualify for the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA). Through this research we find immigrants are willing to stay, and if DAPA were to pass, truly the undocumented immigrants in Idaho would benefit greatly.

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Tables

Table 1. Idaho's Hispanic and non-Hispanic Populations

	Idaho's Hispanic Population	% of Idaho's Hispanics Total Population	Idaho's Total Population	% of Idaho's non-Hispanic Population
1980	36,560	3.9	944,127	96.1
1990	52,927	5.3	1,006,749	94.7
2000	101,690	7.9	1,177,304	92.1
2010	175,901	11.2	1,567,582	88.8

*Source: U.S. Census Idaho QuickLinks (www.census.gov).

Table 2. Fremont County and Canyon County Populations

	Fremont County Total Population	Fremont County Hispanic's Population	% of Hispanic population in Fremont County	Canyon County Total Population	Canyon County Hispanic Population	% of Hispanic population in Canyon County
1990	10,937	762	6.9	90,076	11,838	13.1
2000	11,819	1,255	10.6	131,441	24,455	18.6
2010	13,242	1,694	12.8	188,923	45,069	23.9

* Source: U.S. Census Idaho QuickLinks (www.census.gov).