

How L.A. kept out a million migrants

By Ivan Light

Conventional wisdom holds that cities and metropolitan areas are powerless to deter immigrants from moving in. Evidence suggests otherwise. Between 1980 and 2000, the Los Angeles metropolitan area deflected nearly 1 million Mexican immigrants, legal and illegal, to other U.S. cities.

During that 20-year interval, the immigrant population in the United States increased from 14 million to 31 million, but the percentage of those immigrants living in the city of Los Angeles declined from 6.8% to 4.9%, according to U.S. census data. That translates into 600,000 fewer immigrants in 2000 than would have resided here without the decrease. The same relative decline was evident in the five-county L.A. metropolitan area. The region's share of the U.S. Mexican immigrant population in 1980 was 32% ; 20 years later it was only 17% - about 961,000 fewer Mexican immigrants living in LA, Ventura, Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside counties than otherwise would have.

Why did a million Mexican immigrants bypass the L.A. region and settle elsewhere ? Three factors were important: migration networks, market economics and tougher regulation of slums and sweatshops.

New immigrants like to settle with friends and family members who came earlier, so they tend to cluster in a few localities. Potential migrants back home remain in contact with those who have migrated, and when they decide to leave, follow them. That is why L.A. was home to 31% of the nation's Mexican immigrants in 1980, but only 5% of the U.S. population.

But this kind of network-driven migration eventually caused economic hardship among Latino immigrants in L.A. As migration networks routed ever more immigrant workers here, competition for low -wage jobs and affordable housing intensified . Wages fell, available jobs became scarce and rents rose, forcing some workers to leave the city. More important, many potential immigrants still living in Mexico or Central America decided not to come when the bad economic news reached them. These market dynamics cut the percentage of Latino immigrants living in the L.A. region by about half between 1980 and 2000.

Public policy heightened the effect of these market forces. With wages falling, immigrant poverty increased, and officials sought to alleviate the situation. The unintended consequence of the resulting policy shifts made the L.A. region a less desirable destination for newly arrived immigrant workers.

From 1980 to 2000, for instance, California's minimum wage steadily rose and was 22% higher than its federal counterpart in 2000. The higher wage drove some employers out of California - and many took their largely immigrant workforce with them.

During the 1990s, L.A. began to enforce existing industrial laws more strictly than other major cities. The political catalyst for the crackdown was the 1995 discovery in El Monte of a garment factory in which dozens of Thai immigrant workers were exploited as virtual slaves. Working conditions in the local garment industry, a major employer of immigrants, came under scrutiny, and many garment firms either shut down or left L.A., the jobs vanished and many of their low-wage employees went elsewhere - and potential ones, once news of the crackdown reached Mexico or Central America, probably avoided LA. altogether.

In addition, the combination of rising numbers of Latino immigrants and low wages created more and more slums across L.A. in the late 1980s. Mayors Tom Bradley and Richard Riordan each appointed a commission to investigate the problem. Authorities stepped up enforcement of existing anti-slum laws. Some tenements were shut down; others were forced to upgrade. The resulting decrease in supply of the cheapest housing stripped many low-wage immigrants of affordable shelter.

Finally "NIMBY movements" successfully stopped the construction of affordable housing in many of the L.A. suburbs, which, in turn, drove up immigrant's rents in the central city.

These public policies were neither consciously anti-immigrant nor coordinated by officials, but taken together, they deflected about 1 million Mexican immigrants away from the L.A. region.

This story is more than just a curious episode in local history. It also offers some lessons for cities seeking to control levels of immigration. What L.A. accomplished unintentionally, other metropolitan areas can do by design.

If more cities and states raised their minimum wages above the federal level and strictly enforced industrial safety laws and housing standards, this not only would improve conditions for resident workers but would also deflect new immigrants elsewhere. The overall number of immigrants entering the U.S. would not decline. But new immigrants would head for destinations where employers don't fear labor-law enforcement, where slums are tolerated and where the minimum wage is lower.

This dispersion would tend to equalize the burden of absorbing immigrants across the U.S., creating interest in controlling immigration where their previously was none.

L.A.'s experience may even have implications for U.S. immigration policy. Surely, shutting down sweatshops and slums and increasing the federal minimum wage would be cheaper - and more neighborly - than building a 2,000-mile security fence, militarizing the border or issuing a national identity card to 200 million people.

Short of federal intervention, the L.A. example shows that states and cities have the policy tools to deflect low-wage immigrants heading their way.

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