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A Profile of Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants in Texas and its Largest Metropolitan Areas

By Ariel G. Ruiz Soto and Andrew Selee

Executive Summary

Much of the U.S. debate on Mexican immigration has focused on low-skilled immigrants, who have composed the largest share of that population, but recent data suggest that the share of college-educated immigrants among recent Mexican arrivals is rising considerably. Texas has long been a gateway for Mexican immigration in part because of proximity and its deep economic ties to Mexico.

As more Mexican immigrants settle in Texas, especially in its metropolitan areas, governments and local communities stand to gain valuable contributions of an increasingly educated work force. Knowing the profile of highly skilled Mexican immigrants can inform policy-making decisions and service provision to reduce skill underemployment.ⁱ

This fact sheet provides an overview of trends and key characteristics of Mexican immigrant adults (ages 25 or older) who have a bachelor's degree or higher. It analyzes the legal status composition of highly skilled Mexicans using a unique Migration Policy Institute (MPI) methodology of assigning legal status to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). Among the key findings are:

- Twenty-seven percent of the 678,000 Mexican immigrant adults with college degrees in the United States lived in Texas in 2017.
- Mexican immigrants' rising educational attainment in the United States and Texas is explained by increasing shares of college graduates among recent Mexican immigrants.ⁱⁱ
- Nearly one in five recent Mexican immigrants in Texas had a college degree in 2017, compared to one in ten in 2000.
- Among Texas' largest metropolitan areas, educational attainment of Mexican immigrants increased faster in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio than in Houston and Dallas, potentially indicating a movement of Mexican professionals from U.S. cities on and near the border.

- Significant shares of highly skilled Mexican immigrants are not employed in professional occupations, sometimes because of lack of English-language proficiency or legal status, but in other cases because it is too difficult to get their professional credentials recognized. This “brain waste” deserves further attention, since it may represent an opportunity to take better advantage of the skills that professional immigrants bring to Texas and can contribute to the state’s economy.

I. Trends of Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants

To highlight important geographical differences in recent trends of the college-educated Mexican immigrant population, this section first focuses on rising educational levels nationwide and in Texas, and then presents trends in five of Texas’ largest metropolitan areas.

A. Rising Education Levels in the United States and Texas

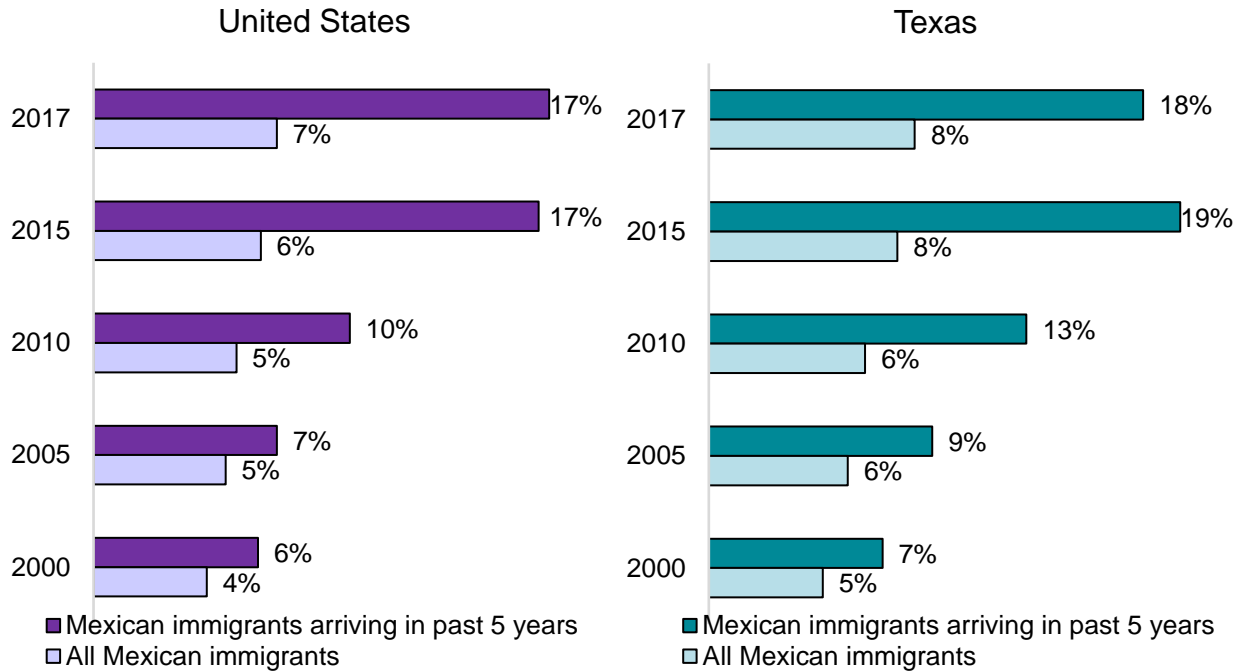
The highly skilled Mexican population in the United States increased from 269,000 in 2000 to 678,000 in 2017. As a result, Mexicans make up the fourth largest ethnic group of college-educated immigrants in the United States after immigrants from India (1.8 million), China (995,000), and the Philippines (906,000).ⁱⁱⁱ Increasing educational attainment among immigrants is primarily explained by rising college attainment rates among recent immigration flows.

In Texas, the college-educated Mexican immigrant population increased more sharply than in the United States, rising from 61,000 in 2000 to 185,000 in 2017. With 27 percent of all highly skilled Mexicans in the United States, Texas is home to the second largest population of Mexican college graduates only after California (215,000).

Recent flows of Mexican immigrants in Texas are increasingly more likely to have a college degree than in past, following the national trend. Only 7 percent of Mexican immigrants in Texas who entered the United States between 1996 and 2000 had a college degree, while approximately 18 percent of immigrants in the cohort that entered the country between 2013 and 2017 were college graduates (see Figure 1). This trend is replicated at the national level at similar rates, with the largest increase in education attainment occurring between 2010 and 2015.

Despite these increases in educational attainment, the share of college graduates among all Mexican immigrants remained relatively low nationwide (7 percent) and in Texas (8 percent) because of the influence of prior immigrant flows in the overall population.

Figure 1. Shares of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in the United States and Texas, by Years of U.S. Residence, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017



Source: Migration Policy Institute calculations of data from U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Decennial Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017.

B. Differences Among Metropolitan Areas in Texas

In 2017, highly skilled Mexican immigrants living in Texas were not concentrated in any one region of the state. While the metropolitan areas of Houston and Dallas had the largest populations of Mexican college graduates, significant numbers of them resided in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio (see Table 1).^{iv} These five metropolitan areas combined accounted for 73 percent of all Mexican college graduates in the state.

Proportionally, college graduates represented larger shares among the Mexican immigrant populations in El Paso (13 percent), McAllen (12 percent), and San Antonio (11 percent), the largest cities close to Mexico, than in Houston (7 percent) and Dallas (6 percent).

Table 1. Estimates and Shares of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in Texas and Selected State Metropolitan Areas, 2017

	College-Educated Immigrant Population	Immigrant Population	College-Educated Share
Texas	185,000	2,225,000	8%
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land	39,000	531,000	7%
Dallas-Ft. Worth-Arlington	33,000	524,000	6%
El Paso	24,000	180,000	13%
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission	21,000	178,000	12%

San Antonio-New Braunfels	18,000	156,000	11%
Other	50,000	655,000	8%

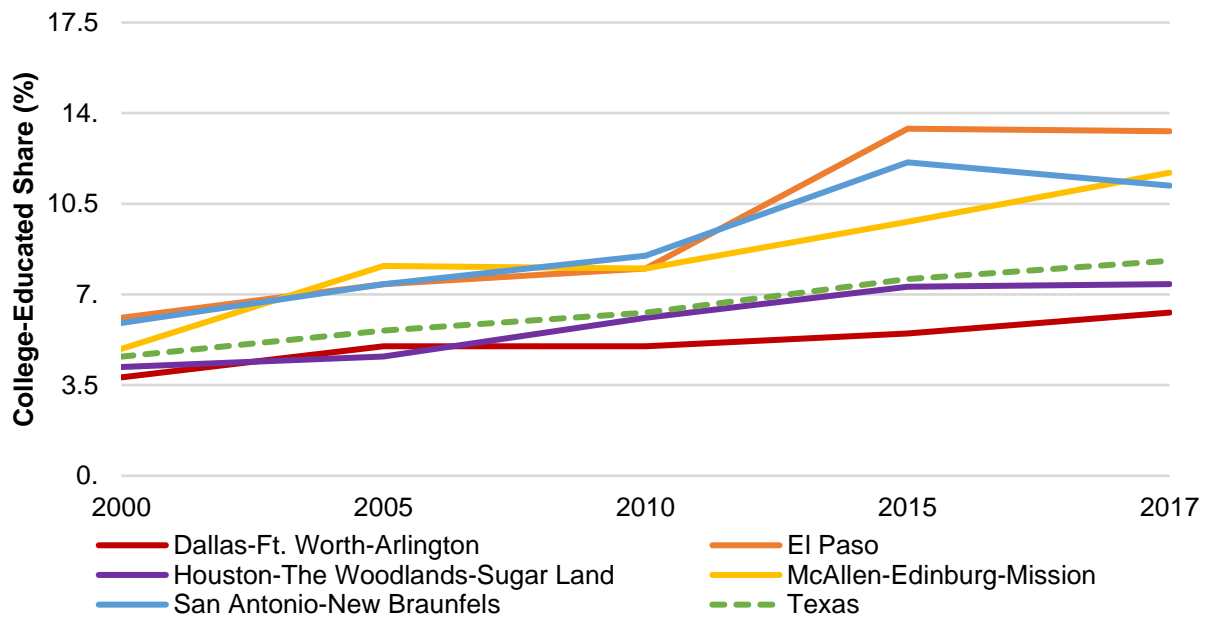
Notes: Population estimates are rounded and may not add up to totals. College-educated shares were calculated from unrounded estimates. Metropolitan areas are defined by boundaries in 2013.

Source: Migration Policy Institute calculations of data from the 2017 ACS.

The educational attainment of Mexican immigrants increased more in some metropolitan areas than others since 2000. Approximately 4 percent of Mexican immigrants in Houston and Dallas had a college degree in 2000, and their educational attainment grew at about the same pace until 2010 when Mexicans in Houston experienced a slight increase compared to those in Dallas (see Figure 2). By 2017, however, Mexican college graduates in Houston and Dallas represent similar shares (7 percent and 6 percent) of their respective populations—both just below the state average.

Meanwhile, Mexican immigrants in El Paso, San Antonio, and McAllen were more likely to have college degrees than statewide. College graduates in the three metropolitan areas represented between 5 percent and 6 percent of Mexican immigrants in 2000, increased to about 8 percent by 2010, but grew at different rates subsequently. The share of highly skilled Mexicans in 2015 was highest in El Paso (13 percent) and lowest in McAllen (10 percent). By 2017, the rates of Mexican college graduates among these metropolitan areas were relatively similar.

Figure 2. Shares of College Graduates among Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) in Texas and Selected State Metropolitan Areas, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017



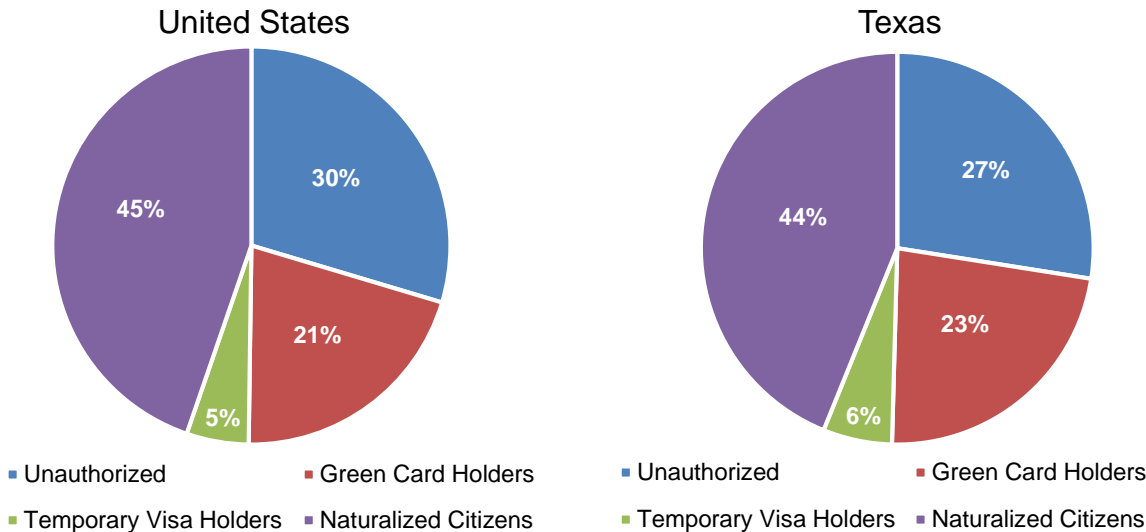
Notes: Metropolitan areas are defined by boundaries in 2013 across years for comparability.

Source: MPI calculations of data from U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Decennial Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2015.

II. Differing Educational Levels by Legal Status

Legal status varied significantly among the college-educated Mexican population, shaping their employment and professional outcomes. Naturalized U.S. citizens represented the largest shares of Mexican college graduates: 45 percent nationwide and 44 percent in Texas (see Figure 2). Legal permanent residents (LPRs) made up 21 percent of highly skilled Mexicans in the United States and 23 percent in Texas; and temporary visa holders (i.e., legal nonimmigrants) represented much smaller shares with 5 percent and 6 percent, respectively. Thirty percent of highly skilled Mexicans in the nation and 27 percent in Texas were unauthorized immigrants, although some of this population had legal protections and employment authorization under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program (DACA).^v

Figure 3. Legal Status Composition of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in the United States and Texas, 2012-2016

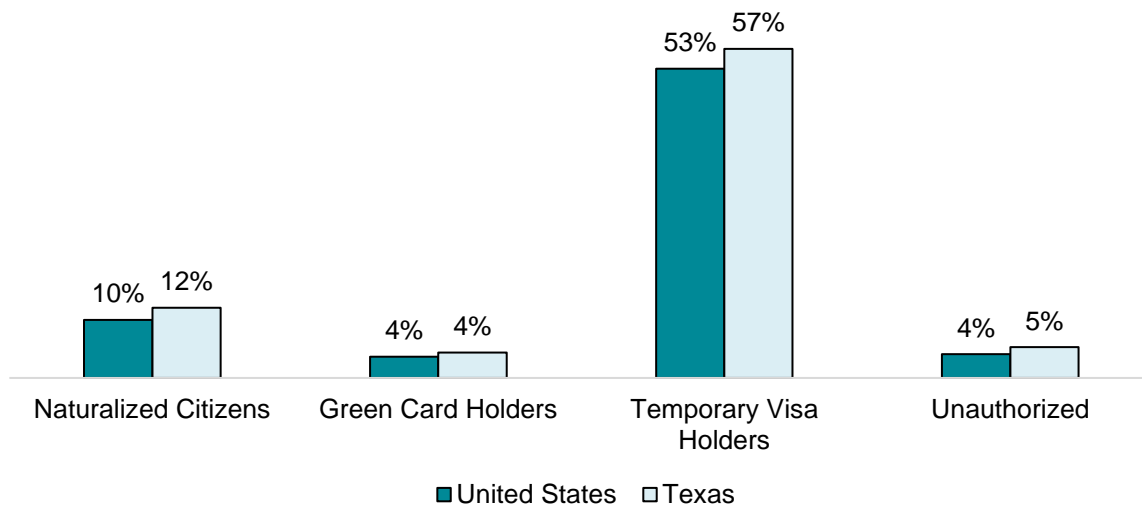


Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2012-16 ACS and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), drawing on a methodology developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute.

At the same time, among Mexican adults (ages 25 or older) in the United States and Texas, the likelihood of having a college degree varied according to legal status. Surprisingly perhaps, more than half of Mexicans who were temporary visa holders had a college degree, with a slightly higher share (57 percent) in Texas than the national average (53 percent, see Figure 3). These relatively high rates are explained by the nature of visa categories, with most immigrants coming to perform higher skilled work or study in the U.S. higher education system, though some may be lower skilled agricultural workers.^{vi} About one in ten Mexicans who were naturalized U.S. citizens were highly

skilled. Notably, Mexican legal permanent residents and unauthorized immigrants were nearly as likely to have a college degree.

Figure 4. Shares of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in the United States and Texas, by Legal Status, 2012-2016



Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2012-16 ACS and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), drawing on a methodology developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute.

III. Key Characteristics of Highly Skilled Mexicans in Metropolitan Texas

More than one-third of highly skilled Mexicans in Texas lived in Houston and Dallas, and their demographic profile was similar (see Table 2). In both metropolitan areas, more than half of highly skilled Mexican immigrants were between the ages of 25 and 44. Surprisingly, 40 percent of Mexican college graduates were limited English proficient, meaning they reported speaking English less than very well.

Differences in the demographic profile of college-educated Mexicans in Houston and Dallas were small but notable. Compared to 52 percent in Houston, 58 percent of highly skilled Mexicans in Dallas were women. Also, poverty levels in Houston were slightly higher (9 percent) than in Dallas (6 percent).

While Mexican college graduates in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio resembled the state average in most indicators, the populations in each metropolitan area had some unique characteristics. Mexicans in El Paso most closely resembled the characteristics at the state level: a young population, slightly more likely to be female, with moderate levels of limited English proficiency and a poverty rate below 10 percent. In McAllen, the highly skilled Mexican population was older,

with one-third of migrants being ages 55 or older, had a significantly higher share of limited English proficiency (58 percent) and a poverty rate of 13 percent. With almost 60 percent of the population between the ages of 25 and 34, Mexican college graduates in San Antonio were younger and less likely to be limited English proficient than the state average.

Table 2. Top Five Industry Categories of Employed Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in Texas and Selected State Metropolitan Areas, 2017

	Texas	Houston- The Woodland s-Sugar Land	Dallas-Ft. Worth- Arlington	El Paso	McAllen- Edinburg- Mission	San Antonio- New Braunfels
Mexican Immigrant Population with College Degree	185,000	39,000	33,000	24,000	21,000	18,000
Age						
25-34	22%	19%	21%	17%	21%	26%
35-44	31%	35%	31%	30%	19%	31%
45-54	27%	27%	31%	26%	28%	27%
55+	20%	18%	17%	27%	33%	16%
Sex						
Female	53%	52%	58%	52%	54%	52%
English Proficiency						
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	43%	40%	41%	46%	58%	29%
Poverty						
Below 100% of Federal Poverty Level	8%	9%	6%	7%	13%	7%
Labor Force						
Population in Labor Force (LF)	143,000	29,000	27,000	18,000	16,000	14,000
Share in LF of Total Population	77%	73%	83%	77%	76%	79%
Share Unemployed of Population in LF	3%	4%	1%	2%	2%	1%

Notes: In the ACS, respondents who report speaking a language other than English at home are asked how well they speak English. Persons who reported speaking English “not at all,” “not well,” or “well” are considered to be Limited English Proficient (LEP). Those who reported speaking a foreign language and speaking English “very well” are referred to as bilingual. Industry category of “colleges, universities, and professional schools” also includes junior colleges. Industry categories left blank did not meet threshold sample size. Metropolitan areas are defined by boundaries in 2013.

Source: MPI calculations of data from the 2017 ACS.

As for employment characteristics, highly skilled Mexican immigrants in Houston and Dallas had a similar number of immigrants participating in the labor force, but proportionally those in Dallas made up a larger share (83 percent) than those in Houston (73 percent). In Dallas, Mexican college graduates were also less likely to be unemployed than those in Houston.

The employment profiles of Mexican immigrants with college degrees in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio were similar to each other and the state average.

Differences in industries of employment of highly skilled Mexicans were more sharply defined across the five metropolitan areas. Elementary and secondary schools was the largest industry of employment in these cities, except for in Houston where the construction was the top employment category (see Table 3). But the subsequent categories were more diverse: In Houston, legal services were the fourth largest industry of employment for Mexican college educated immigrants; employment in restaurants and other food services was the third largest industry in Dallas; in El Paso, employment in colleges and other higher education institutions ranked third; and the second largest industry in McAllen was wholesale groceries.

These labor force and industry profiles combined suggest that highly skilled Mexican immigrants in Texas and these five metropolitan areas experience significant underemployment, as they are not able to fully utilize the skills they acquired in college.

Table 3. Top Five Industry Categories of Employed Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in Texas and Selected State Metropolitan Areas, 2017

Rank	Texas	Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land	Dallas-Ft. Worth-Arlington	El Paso	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission	San Antonio-New Braunfels
1	Elementary and secondary schools	Construction	Elementary and secondary schools	Elementary and secondary schools	Elementary and secondary schools	Elementary and secondary schools
2	Construction	Elementary and secondary schools	Construction	Construction	Wholesale Grocery	-
3	Restaurants and other food services	Hospitals	Restaurants and other food services	Colleges, universities, and professional schools*	-	-
4	Hospitals	Legal Services	Hospitals	Hospitals	-	-
5	Colleges, universities, and professional schools*	-	-	-	-	-

Notes: Industry category of “colleges, universities, and professional schools” also includes junior colleges. Industry categories left blank did not meet threshold sample size. Metropolitan areas are defined by boundaries in 2013. *Source:* MPI calculations of data from U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Decennial Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2015

III. Conclusions

The share of Mexican immigrants with a college degree has increased significantly in Texas and across its five largest metropolitan areas in recent years. Today almost one in five recent Mexican immigrants living in Texas has a college degree, versus only 7 percent in 2000. This mirrors a nation-wide trend and has resulted in increasing educational attainment in the overall population of Mexican immigrants.

While the largest number of highly skilled Mexican immigrants resided in Houston and Dallas, the metropolitan areas nearest the U.S.-Mexico border—El Paso, and McAllen, and San Antonio—all had higher shares of highly skilled Mexican immigrants.

There appear to be several reasons for the trend toward a greater number of college-educated Mexican immigrants. First, educational attainment in Mexico has increased significantly over the past two decades. Today students in Mexico are three times more likely to attend college than only twenty or twenty-five years ago, and average educational attainment has improved from roughly six years of study to nine years over a twenty-year period.^{vii}

Mexicans are also taking more advantage of high-skilled immigrant visa categories in the United States, both the H-1B program and the TN visa, which was implemented in the 1990s as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) but expanded significantly after 2010.

Rising violence in Mexico appears to have driven many Mexican professionals to live in the United States, mostly in border cities like McAllen and El Paso, as well as in nearby cities like San Antonio.

Finally, many Mexican companies have established a major investment presence in the United States in the past decade, bringing senior executives and key personnel with them. Texas has led the way as a major destination for Mexican business investment, with Dallas as a center for much of that presence.^{viii}

However, the overall picture of labor market insertion for highly skilled Mexican immigrants in Texas paints a mixed picture, as it does across the United States. Their demographic and employment characteristics indicate they experience significant underemployment. Large shares of Mexican college graduates were employed in industries that do not require a college degree and may not provide them with the opportunity to fully utilize their skills.

Legal status limitations can create barriers in higher education and employment, especially among the unauthorized immigrant population, but it alone does not explain underemployment among highly skilled Mexicans. Insufficient English language skills and difficult requirements to credential recognition present other barriers, as previous research finds for immigrant groups in general across the United States.

This presents an important challenge for public policy, since access to language training and simplified requirements for recognizing professional degrees and skill certification would allow

some of these Mexican immigrants to move more easily into their preferred occupations in Texas and add to the ranks of qualified professionals in the state.

Yet even with these challenges, evidence suggests that the profile of Mexican immigrants to the United States is changing significantly and Texas can lead the way. As policymakers seek to attract talent to be competitive, updating current frameworks for understanding new immigration trends from Mexico can contribute to the design of policy strategies for incorporating highly skilled immigrants.

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His research focuses on the impact of U.S. immigration policies on immigrants' experiences of socioeconomic integration across varying geographical and political contexts. More recently, Mr. Ruiz Soto has analyzed methodological approaches to estimate sociodemographic trends of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States. His research has been published in *Latino Studies* and in *Crossing the United States-Mexico Border: Policies, Dynamics, and Consequences of Mexican Migration to the United States* (University of Texas Press).

Mr. Ruiz Soto holds a master's degree from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration with an emphasis on immigration policy and service provision, and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Whitman College.

Andrew Selee is President of MPI. He joined the Institute in 2017 after 17 years at the Woodrow Wilson International Center where he served as Executive Vice President and founded and directed the Center's Mexico Institute. Selee is the author and editor of several books, including *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (Public Affairs, 2018).

Dr. Selee received his PhD in policy studies from the University of Maryland; his MA in Latin American studies from the University of California, San Diego; and his BA from Washington University in St. Louis.

Endnotes

ⁱ The term *college graduate* refers to adults ages 25 or older and having at least a bachelor's degree. It is used interchangeably in this fact sheet with *college educated* and *highly skilled*.

ⁱⁱ *Recent immigrants* (or *recent arrivals*) are immigrants who arrived in the United States within the last five years prior to the survey year cited. For example, recent immigrants in 2017 are those who arrived in 2013 or after.

ⁱⁱⁱ Estimates of Chinese highly skilled immigrants include those from Hong Kong but exclude those from Taiwan. For more, see Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, 2017, *New Brain Gain: Rising Human Capital among Recent Immigrants to the United States*, Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

^{iv} Metropolitan areas are abbreviated in the text of this fact sheet and include other cities and outlying areas as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau. Houston includes the Woodlands and Sugarland; Dallas includes Ft. Worth and Arlington; El Paso includes El Paso County and Hudspeth County; McAllen includes Edinburg and Mission; and San Antonio includes the principal city of New Braunfels and is composed of eight counties: Atascosa, Bandera, Bexar, Comal, Guadalupe, Kendall, Medina, and Wilson.

^v Implemented by the Obama Administration in June 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program provides qualifying unauthorized immigrant youth protection from removal and employment authorization, renewable every two years. The program was terminated by the Trump administration in September 2017, but due to federal court orders in January and February 2018, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) continues to accept renewal requests. For more information see, USCIS, "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals: Response to January 2018 Preliminary Injunction," updated February 14, 2018, www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-response-january-2018-preliminary-injunction.

^{vi} Bryan Baker, *Nonimmigrants Residing in the United States: Fiscal Year 2016* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2016), [www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Nonimmigrant Population%20Estimates 2016_0.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Nonimmigrant%20Population%20Estimates%202016_0.pdf).

^{vii} Andrew Selee, *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018), page 66.

^{viii} See Alfredo Corchado, "It's destination Dallas for upwardly mobile Mexicans who are strengthening their homeland's economic ties with the U.S.," *Dallas Morning News*, August 17, 2018. On growing Mexican investment in Texas and across the United States, see also Selee, *Vanishing Frontiers*, chapter 3.