

The Social Process of International Migration

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The social process of network growth helps to explain the rapid increase in the migration of Mexicans to the United States during the 1970s. Migrant networks are webs of social ties that link potential migrants in sending communities to people in receiving societies, and their existence lowers the costs of international movement. With each person that becomes a migrant, the cost of migration is reduced for a set of friends and relatives, inducing them to migrate and further expanding the network. As a result of this dynamic interaction, network connections to the United States have become widespread throughout Mexico, and the probability of international migration from that country is high.

Networks and the Costs of International Migration

In formulating strategies to confront an uncertain economic environment, families in developing countries consider the costs and benefits of different activities that their members might pursue, one of which is foreign labor. The expected costs of international migration include costs of transportation, income forgone while making the move, and the psychological toll of moving to a foreign country. Expected returns include nonmonetary satisfactions such as political freedom and family reunification, but for Mexican migrants the most important returns are usually economic: the higher wages to be earned by working in a richer economy. When the net returns to international migration are perceived as greater than those of local employment or internal migration, one or more family members will probably migrate abroad for work.