

NAFTAs policies surrounding U.S. corn exportation: the effects it had on migratory patterns in

Oaxaca, Mexico

Alexis Stinnett

GLBL 446: Development and Social Change in Latin America

Professor Derrick Hindery

2 June 2023

Immigration is a heated topic in today's political climate and has been for some time now. The debate about what to do at our border is ever present and the concerns about the type of people crossing the border is a factor that is pertinent in our society today. However, before giving any credit to stereotypes, I think it is important to analyze why over the past decade we have had such an increase in immigration to the U.S. from Mexico. There are many factors that contribute to immigration patterns, and they are different for every individual that makes the decision to come to the United States. However, when assessing specific events that have been a catalyst in the increase in immigration, neoliberal policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have stood out as one of the leading push factors. In this paper, I will be focusing on how NAFTA affected the ability of small corn farmers to make a profit and how this in turn has been one of the major factors influencing people to migrate to the United States. Now this is a broad topic and NAFTA has affected many sectors in Mexico, but for the sake of this paper, I will primarily be focusing on Oaxaca, Mexico, and how NAFTA has affected their local corn farmers and their migration patterns. I will also be assessing various programs that have attempted to relieve some of the economic stresses NAFTA has burdened small corn farmers with and discuss how these programs can be bettered to assist Oaxacan corn farmers, and in turn, decrease their need to migrate.

During the process of conducting my research, I used a variety of different types of sources to support my argument. In terms of primary sources, I scoured hundreds of newspaper articles published in Latin America from January 1994, when NAFTA was officially implemented, to April 1996. The majority of these articles were originally written in Spanish and were then translated and posted through the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. The

main reason I chose to analyze newspaper reports from the early days of NAFTA was because I was curious to see what the public sentiment surrounding NAFTA was at the time. The articles I read and chose to include in my research represent how the people of Mexico felt about the trade agreement. For my secondary sources, I consulted several books, articles, and government reports that discussed the effects NAFTA had on corn farmers and agriculture as well as how it contributed to the increase in migration from Oaxaca to the U.S. I also have pulled some graphs and charts from some of these articles to provide more quantitative evidence for my research.

As NAFTA was implemented on January 1st of 1994 it was supposed to bring job opportunities and a more competitive economy to Mexico. By opening the trade markets between Mexico, Canada, and the United States all countries were supposed to reap benefits. However, NAFTA did not meet the expectations of the people in Mexico. In an article published in a Mexico City newspaper titled *LA JORNADA*, October 7th of 1995 this dissatisfaction with NAFTA policies is prevalent. The paper states, "Twenty months after its implementation the expected benefits of the NAFTA are practically nonexistent, it has not appropriated any new investments thus creating 'more and better' productive jobs, it has not encouraged any drop in domestic prices, and neither has it prompted any stable and permanent conditions allowing Mexican goods to access U.S. markets" (Rios, 1995, p. 13). Not only was the public unsatisfied with NAFTA and its alleged benefits but it also had an extremely negative effect on local corn farmers. When NAFTA was implemented, it had set up a plan that would slowly phase out tariffs on corn in 14 years. However, what was supposed to take place in 14 years took place in three flooding Mexico's corn market with cheap U.S. corn. According to Ackerman in the piece,

Free trade, corn, and the environment: environmental impacts of US-Mexico corn trade under NAFTA, “US exports to Mexico rose from 3.1 million metric tons in 1994 to 5.2 million tons in 2000, or from 1.2% to 2.1% of the US corn crop” (Ackerman et al., 2003, p. 2). As pointed out by this statistic in the span of the six years between 1994 and 2000 there was a drastic increase in the amount of corn being exported from the United States to Mexico. In addition to this statistic Ackerman also points out that, “Roughly 3 million people are employed in the cultivation of corn” (Ackerman et al., 2003, p. 3). Due to the fact that so many people were employed by the production of corn, job and profit losses were inevitable. As more cheap U.S. corn flooded Mexico's market small farmers experienced a dramatic loss in income by 66 percent (Patten, 2022, p. 263). Due to the increase in corn exports from the U.S. to Mexico after the implementation of NAFTA and the rate at which this increase occurred, it made growing corn unprofitable and challenged the livelihoods of many small corn farmers who had been making their living from selling corn for decades.

When specifically discussing Oaxaca in the context of the economic destruction of small farmers due to large U.S. corn exports the effects are severe. Oaxaca is one of the top 10 states in corn production in Mexico (Nadal, 2002, p. 22). The corn produced in Oaxaca is primarily used for domestic consumption which is one of the reasons corn farmers in this state were so severely affected by NAFTA policies. As pointed out by Ranko Oliver, “NAFTA affects grain farmers more significantly because they produce principally for the domestic market and are, therefore, more directly affected by imports of American Agriculture products” (Oliver, 2007, p. 88). NAFTA policies have made it close to impossible for farmers in Oaxaca to make a profit or break-even selling corn. As reported by Anjali Browning who spent time researching the effects

NAFTA had on corn farmers in San Juan Guelavía, a town in Oaxaca, stated that “Like most small farmers in Mexico, Guelavíans can no longer sell corn even for the cost of planting it” (Browning, 2013, p. 87). Even though NAFTA was supposed to open the market so that Mexico had more trade opportunities with Canada and the United States, it seems to have done the opposite for corn farmers in Oaxaca. It has not only destroyed their livelihood but also impacted thousands of years of traditional corn-growing practices. In the next part of my paper, I will begin to focus on how these severe economic effects that NAFTA had on corn farming affected the migration patterns of Mexico, specifically in Oaxaca.

In terms of how NAFTA affected migration patterns, it is first important to consider that NAFTA had very little language discussing immigration as it was a policy surrounding free trade and economic policies. However, a large factor driving the reason why NAFTA was approved was because of the effects it was suspected to have on immigration, specifically in the United States. As mentioned previously NAFTA was supposed to provide more jobs that had better pay in Mexico, which many thought would curb illegal immigration to the United States. President Clinton himself commented on this during a town hall meeting in Sacramento saying, “One of the reasons that I so strongly support this North American Free Trade Agreement is, if you have more jobs on both sides of the border and incomes go up in Mexico, that will dramatically reduce the pressure felt by Mexican working people to come here for jobs. Most immigrants come here illegally not for the social services, most come here for the jobs” (Manning & Butera, 2007, p. 185). Not only did Clinton comment on this but many politicians in Mexico did as well.

Despite the fact that NAFTA was not a policy that dealt with immigration directly, the goal to curb illegal immigration was one of the reasons the policy was passed. As stated by Manning and Butera in their piece, *Global Restructuring and U. S.-Mexican Economic Integration: Rhetoric and Reality of Mexican Immigration Five Years After NAFTA*, "The underlying

assumption of the political discourse over NAFTA is that free trade can facilitate international capital mobility to Mexico without a corresponding increase in the movement of labor to the United States" (Manning & Butera, 2007,

p. 200). Despite the desires and

predictions that NAFTA would help to

prevent illegal immigration to the U.S., it

seems to have done the opposite.

According to a chart produced by

Manning and Butera (Figure 1), illegal

immigration apprehensions increased

from 1992 to 1999. Even though these

statistics only go up to 1999 it shows how

immigration increased in a post NAFTA

world. The lack of jobs created by NAFTA

that all governments involved claimed it

would provide, coupled with the fact

that U.S. corn exports to Mexico effectively destroyed small farmers' abilities to produce a

Table 6
*Border Patrol Apprehensions**
1992-1999

1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
<i>Del Rio, Texas</i>							
33.4	42.3	50.0	76.5	121.1	113.3	131.1	156.7
<i>El Centro, California</i>							
29.9	30.1	27.7	37.3	66.9	146.2	226.7	178.3
<i>El Paso, Texas</i>							
248.6	285.8	79.7	111.0	145.9	124.4	125.0	87.0
<i>Laredo, Texas</i>							
72.4	82.4	73.1	93.3	131.8	141.9	103.4	89.0
<i>McAllen, Texas</i>							
85.9	109.0	124.3	169.1	210.6	243.7	204.3	133.5
<i>San Diego, California</i>							
565.6	531.7	450.2	524.2	483.8	283.9	248.1	146.2
<i>Tucson, Arizona</i>							
71.0	92.6	139.5	227.5	305.3	272.4	387.4	352.8
<i>Yuma, Arizona</i>							
24.9	23.6	21.2	20.9	28.3	30.2	76.2	72.4
<i>South West Border</i>							
1,516.7	1,145.6	1,212.9	979.1	1,271.4	1,507.0	1,368.7	1,537.0
<i>U.S. Total</i>							
1,555.8	1,199.6	1,263.5	1,031.7	1,324.2	1,549.9	1,411.9	1,225.7

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, September 1999.

*Number of apprehensions in thousands. These statistics include the apprehension of the same individuals more than once.

Figure 1

livelihood for themselves and their families, was ultimately a push factor in why many people, especially from small states like Oaxaca chose to migrate.

When turning to look specifically at the impacts NAFTA had on migration patterns in Oaxaca one must acknowledge the effect that U.S. corn had on shaping economic hardships that plague many rural communities in Mexico's southern region. As previously addressed, NAFTAs policies regarding corn exports made it nearly impossible for small farmers to produce corn as a product used to support themselves and their families. Corn production, or the lack thereof, is directly related to migratory patterns. Oaxaca is one of the top ten corn producers in Mexico as well as one of the top 10 states regarding migratory flow (Nadal, 2002, p. 22). As shown by data analyzed in Alejandro Nadal's piece titled, *Corn in NAFTA: eight years after*, the states that produce the most corn, are also the states where there is an influx of migration. This is due to the fact that corn is no longer a viable option for farmers, and they must look elsewhere for income. In addition to these statistics, interviews conducted by Browning with locals of San Juan Guelavía, show that migration has become one of the only options for people to support their families. Through these interviews, Browning found that "virtually all residents must find additional income, and given the proportion of people earning at or below minimum wage, migration has become one of few options" (Browning, 2013, p. 95). With no viable way for local farmers to produce income due to the inability to produce corn, many have had no other choice than to migrate to the United States to find a job that pays enough to support their families. The increase in migration in response to NAFTA was a phenomenon seen relatively quickly after NAFTA was implemented. In a news article published in 1996 by a newspaper based in Mexico City titled, *PROCESO* scholars from Mexico's National Autonomous

University of Mexico (UNAM) are quoted discussing how NAFTAs failure is one of the reasons there has been an increase in illegal immigration. The paper quotes one of these scholars saying, “According to Elaine Levine of UNAM’s Economic Research Institute, this situation is caused by NAFTA’s failure because, instead of creating jobs, this agreement has provoked the closure of thousands of plants to the extent that entire sectors, such as the textile sector, have found survival difficult in the “post-NAFTA” climate” (Correa, 1996). As shown in this quote, the small corn production sector of Mexico was not the only sector heavily affected by NAFTAs policies. The commenting on the failure of NAFTA and how it has been connected to illegal immigration not only shows how intense the problem was and still is, but it also shows how the public felt about NAFTA at the time. They felt as if it had failed them, and I argue that in many ways it did. Due to the economic havoc that NAFTA caused specifically in the corn production sector, it forced and still does force many people from Oaxaca and other southern states in Mexico to make the dangerous journey across the border, just to find a job that provides a livable wage for them and their families.

As I have pointed out there are many challenges that small corn farmers in Oaxaca and other southern states in Mexico have faced. These challenges have forced many people to leave their homes and migrate to the United States. Many local governments and the Mexican government itself have recognized these issues and have tried to implement programs to help small farmers by ensuring above-market prices for local producers, encouraging the growth of other crops and animals, as well as helping with programs to increase resources for many of these communities. For this paper, I will be focusing on two programs that have been implemented with the goal of trying to aid small farmers. One program which is outlined in

Browning's work is called Caja por Caja (Crate for Crate) and is administered by the Alianza para el Campo (Alliance for the Countryside). In this program federal funds are used to provide small farmers with a crate of animals and in return, a crate of the same amount and kind of animals is expected to be returned at a later date. The funds pay for half of the original price of the animals and the farmers are welcome to do what they see fit with the animals. (Browning, 2013, p. 102). However, there are numerous problems with this program. Not only are very few individuals qualified for the program but getting approved takes a very long time. In addition to the time

constraint, the starting price of these

Stratum	Definition	Support per eligible hectare
Small Grower	Registered under Proagro, with up to 5 ha non-irrigated or 0.2 ha irrigated	1,600 pesos (84.21 USD)
	Registered under PIMAF, with up to 3 ha	
Medium Grower	Registered under Proagro, with 5-20 ha non-irrigated or 0.2-5 ha irrigated	1,000 pesos (52.64 USD)

Figure 2

crates is usually too expensive for families to afford, as the price is not specified by any agency but is set by the dealer of the animals. Despite the good intentions of this program, many issues prevent locals from being able to take full advantage of its benefits. Another program that was implemented in 2019 by Mexico's president Andrés Manuel López Obrador is titled, Production for wellbeing. In an article published by the Global Agricultural Information Networks Grain Report, it outlines the goals of this program stating, "The program's overall objective is to

increase domestic grain production to help small producers reach a higher level of food self-sufficiency" (Kuypers, 2019, p. 2). Through this program, small and medium farmers will have



Figure 3

access to a set amount of funds as outlined in a chart produced by the Global Agricultural Information Networks Report (Figure 2). As a part of

this program, the government has also promised to set guaranteed-above market prices for commodities such as wheat, bean, corn, rice, and fresh milk, in the hope that it will improve conditions of poverty for small and medium farmers (See Figure 3 for set prices).

The two programs I have outlined are only some of the few that have been implemented with the goal to help small farmers in Southern Mexico. Despite the good nature of these programs, there are some fundamental flaws. One of these flaws is that to have access to these programs and funds one must be a very specific person and be able to understand how to go about the complicated application process. Another issue is that many of these programs are not created in a way that helps specific communities, making it hard for the vast majority to take advantage of these various benefits. Of all the different programs I looked at throughout the process of my research, very few are successful, and if they are successful, it is on a small level. One of the main ways I believe these programs can become more successful is to begin to put funds in the hands of local communities. By putting funds in the hands of communities, they are given the chance to do what they believe is best with the funds based on that community-specific situation. For some, this may be to improve the water system and for others, it may be to invest in farm equipment to make the farming process more efficient. By creating these large programs, many people are left out and not able to access the specific resources they need to improve their livelihood, which as mentioned earlier, leads them to migrate to the U.S. Another way I found that these systems can be improved in through making the application processes easier to navigate and understand. For many people, the process of applying for these programs is so daunting that they chose not to. In addition to the complication of these applications, they cater only to a small and specific group of people,

which makes it increasingly harder for people to access the help they need. In addition to making the application process easier, it is important that these programs focus on outreach. Many people in these rural communities do not know about these programs. By focusing on outreach more people will know about these programs, which in turn allows more people to participate. Overall, many of the programs have good foundations but to improve they need to be more community based and focus more on outreach and helping to simplify the application process. If these programs can improve, more rural farmers in southern Mexico will likely be able to begin to increase their livelihood which in turn will decrease their need to migrate to the United States.

Migration, Corn, and NAFTA are deeply intertwined. These connections are most prevalent in Mexico's southern states like Oaxaca. When NAFTA was implemented, it allowed the U.S. to export large amounts of subsidized corn to Mexico, effectively wiping out the domestic market for small corn producers in Mexico. Due to the economic issues, NAFTA caused for many small farmers, they no longer had the ability to live off of the corn they produced and were forced to migrate to the United States to take care of themselves, and their families. Despite several programs that have been put into place in an effort to help revitalize the small agriculture industry in the south of Mexico, many have shortcomings and do not provide the necessary help. However, if these programs focused more on community-specific needs as well as outreach then it is possible they will help the small farmers come back from the economic devastation NAFTA caused, which will in turn decrease the need for Oaxacans and others to migrate to the United States.

For the service-learning portion of my paper, I decided to work with Students for Indigenous Rights and Environmental Justice in Bolivia, a program here at the University of Oregon. Through my work with this group, I have attended a variety of meetings and have taken on the role of coordinating with Next Step Recycling in an attempt to secure donations of various electronics such as cameras, computers, projectors, recording equipment, and other things for the student group to bring with them when they travel down to Bolivia this summer. I have also researched and reached out to other groups similar to Next Step Recycling in the greater area to try to secure more donations. The goal behind securing these electronics is so that various indigenous groups in Bolivia can use these electronics for classes and radio recordings. Even though my service learning was not directly connected to my research I have met many wonderful people through this experience both here in Eugene and Bolivia. I have also learned a lot about what the needs of indigenous groups are in Bolivia and how we here in the States can help. Even though I will not be traveling to Bolivia I plan to continue working with this group.

References

Ackerman, F., Wise, T. A., Gallagher, K. P., Ney, L., & Flores, R. (2003). *Free trade, corn, and the environment: environmental impacts of US-Mexico corn trade under NAFTA*. Medford, MA, USA: Tufts University.

Browning, A. (2013). *Corn, tomatoes, and a dead dog: Mexican agricultural restructuring after NAFTA and rural responses to declining maize production in Oaxaca, Mexico*. Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos, 29(1), 85-119.

Correa, G. (1996, April 15). *Mexico: NAFTA said to spark illegal emigration to U.S.* PROCESO, p. 7-8.

Kuypers, K. USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (2019). *Mexico Announces New Agricultural Support Programs* (Report No. MX9016). Global Agricultural Information Network.

Manning, R. D., & Butera, A. C. (2000). *Global Restructuring and U. S.-Mexican Economic Integration: Rhetoric and Reality of Mexican Immigration Five Years After NAFTA*. *American Studies*, 41(2/3), 183–209. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643236>

Nadal Egea. (2002). *Corn in NAFTA : eight years after*. [North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation].

Oliver, R. (2007). *In the Twelve Years of NAFTA, the Treaty Gave to Me..What, Exactly: An Assessment of Economic, Social, and Political Developments in Mexico since 1994 and Their Impact on Mexican Immigration into the United States*. Harvard Latino Law Review, 10, 53-134.

Patten, D. (2022). *Crimes against agriculture: NAFTA as State Crime in Mexico*. State Crime Journal, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.13169/statecrime.11.2.0258>

Relinger, R. (2010). *NAFTA and US corn subsidies: Explaining the displacement of Mexico's corn farmers*. Prospect Journal of International Affairs at UCSD.

Rios, P. M. (1995, October 13). *Article asses Nafta's performance*. LA JORNADA, pp. 12–13.