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Documented and Undocumented Skilled Mexican Immigrants and the Global Recession in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Region

Inmigrantes mexicanos calificados documentados e indocumentados y la recesión global en la región metropolitana de Los Ángeles

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to analyze the labor market integration of documented and undocumented skilled Mexican immigrants in the Los Angeles metropolitan region during the global recession of 2008. To this end, we use a mixed methodological approach. From the quantitative perspective, we analyze data from the American Community Survey. The qualitative approach includes 20 open-ended interviews with Mexican skilled immigrants. The main findings reveal that skilled immigrants were not negatively affected by the global recession. In addition, legal immigration status turned out to be the most important factor in differentiating those who obtained a skilled occupation and those who did not. However, some immigrants, including those who were undocumented, were able to strategically use their investment in human capital and their access to professional social networks in order to obtain professional occupations.

Key words: immigration, labor market, global recession, skilled immigrants, Los Angeles, Mexico.

Resumen

El propósito principal de este artículo es analizar la integración en el mercado laboral de inmigrantes mexicanos calificados, documentados e indocumentados, en la región metropolitana de Los Ángeles durante la recesión global de 2008. Para ello, utilizamos un enfoque metodológico mixto. Desde la perspectiva cuantitativa, analizamos datos de la Encuesta de la Comunidad Americana. El enfoque cualitativo incluye veinte entrevistas abiertas con inmigrantes mexicanos calificados. Los principales hallazgos revelan que los inmigrantes calificados no se

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vieron afectados negativamente por la recesión global. Además, el estado migratorio legal resultó ser el factor más importante para diferenciar entre aquellos que obtuvieron una ocupación calificada y aquellos que no lo hicieron. Sin embargo, algunos inmigrantes, incluidos los indocumentados, pudieron utilizar estratégicamente su inversión en capital humano y su acceso a redes sociales profesionales para obtener ocupaciones profesionales.
Palabras clave: inmigración, mercado laboral, recesión global, inmigrantes calificados, Los Ángeles, México.

Introduction

The Great Recession that began at the end of 2007 in the United States rapidly impacted the economy of the world, negatively affecting all markets including the international migrant labor market. Migrant workers became one of the first victims of rising unemployment in many of the industries in which they worked, reaching higher unemployment rates than those of their native counterparts. Similarly, many governments began to design voluntary return programs for immigrants who were no longer needed.

The Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009. During this period of time, real gross domestic product in the United States fell 4.3 percent from its peak in the fourth quarter of 2007. This constituted the largest decline in the postwar era. In December 2007, the unemployment rate was 5 percent, but rose to 10 percent in October 2009. Home prices fell approximately 30 percent in mid-2009, on average, from their mid-2006 peak (Rich, 2008). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) noted in November 2008 that the sectors most affected by the recession in the United States were manufacturing, construction and services to industries.

Mexican immigrants employed in the construction sector were directly affected by the global recession, but what about Mexican workers who can be considered skilled because of their level of schooling? Were they also affected by the Great Recession? The main purpose of this article is to analyze the labor market integration of skilled Mexican immigrants in the Los Angeles metropolitan area during the global recession in 2008. To this end, we use a twofold approach using quantitative and qualitative methods.

First, from the quantitative approach, we use our own data calculations from the American Community Survey to examine labor market integration of Mexican immigrants 25 years and over who had at least 16 years of formal education who resided in the Los Angeles metropolitan area in California. This region comprises the following five counties: Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside, Ventura and Orange.

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The qualitative approach included 20 open-ended and semi-structured interviews that were obtained from a snowball sample, which is a non-random sample built by following informal networks. The interviews were conducted during fieldwork between September and November of 2008 and the interviewees were contacted following information provided by leaders of Mexican hometown associations established in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The names of the interviewees and other specific information have been changed to protect their identities (Galicia Bretón Mora, 2012).

The 20 interviewees included Mexican men and women who completed university studies in Mexico and were born in the states of Zacatecas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. Through open-ended interviews conducted in 2008, we explored the role that human capital investment, immigration status, and social networks played in getting professional employment that matched the education level of skilled immigrants.

The article is divided into four sections in addition to this introduction. The first section is used to develop the theoretical discussion that guides the analysis. In the second section, descriptive statistics are used to examine the labor market integration of skilled Mexican immigrants in the Los Angeles metropolitan area using data from the American Community Survey. The third section analyzeses the labor integration experiences of 20 documented and undocumented skilled Mexican immigrants who were interviewed in Los Angeles in 2008. Finally, the conclusion highlights the factors that have intervened in the labor integration of skilled Mexican immigrants as well as their theoretical implications.

Skilled Immigrants, U.S. Immigration Policy and Labor Market Integration

The movement of skilled migrants around the world gained greater importance during the second half of the twentieth century, due to its accelerated growth and its economic impact on origin and destination countries. The increasing volume of skilled migrants is a direct consequence of the expansion and diversification of university education worldwide, which has come to include developing countries. This trend has also been strongly influenced by the power that corporations exert in the global search for the "best and brightest" workers and the implementation of immigration policies by developed countries that favor the permanent and temporary movement of skilled migrants (Calva Sánchez and Alarcón, 2015).

It is difficult to employ a single concept to define a skilled migrant due to the diverse criteria used for this purpose. The broad definition states that a skilled migrant

is an individual who has a tertiary or university education level and thus has at least 16 years of formal schooling (Zaletel, 2006; Alarcón Acosta, 2007; Batalova et al., 2008; Chaloff and Lemaître, 2009). For other authors, a skilled migrant is an individual who has physical and specialized cognitive or interpersonal skills to develop specific tasks and experience in certain fields (Salt, 1992; Iredale, 2001). Skilled migrants can also be defined by the nature of the occupation in which they are employed or by the wages paid to them (Chaloff and Lemaître, 2009).

According to Luis Calva (2014), some authors argue that Mexicans make up one of the largest groups of skilled migrants in the world. However, these authors do not consider that nearly half of them did not complete their university studies in Mexico. Therefore, they did not leave their country with a sufficient level of schooling to be considered skilled migrants. For this reason, the estimate of the number of Mexican skilled migrants goes down from 529,000 to 294,000 in 2011.

Neoclassical theory states that skilled migrants see their investment in human capital diminish when they arrive to the destination country and realize that their skills or qualifications are not transferable. This is one of the reasons why migrants often obtain lower-level jobs. But the more time the skilled migrants spend in the destination country, the more they acquire knowledge of the labor market, improve their language skills, adopt lifestyles and in some cases obtain certificates and/or local credentials that are better valued (Chiswick et al., 2002).

Although social factors influence the labor integration of skilled migrants, they are nonetheless ignored by human capital theory. Social capital refers to the ability of migrants to mobilize resources such as employment information as a result of belonging to a social structure. In this sense, social networks are the result of the association among groups of people linked together by occupational, ethnic, family or cultural and emotional ties (Coleman, 1990; Portes 1995).

Immigration policy regulates the circulation of labor across international borders and allows or limits immigrants' labor integration. In industrialized countries such as the United States, France, Germany, Canada and Australia, policies are in place to promote skilled labor immigration through immigrant and temporary work visas, work permit exemptions for intra-firm transfers, tax incentives and return policies (McLaughlan and Salt, 2002; Docquier and Rapoport, 2008).

In 1990, the United States Congress addressed the question of immigrant human capital and the resulting consequences for the global competitiveness of the United States when favoring the immigration of skilled persons. The Immigration Act of 1990 significantly expanded the proportion of employment-based immigrant visas, increasing their number from 54,000—as stated in previous immigration law—to 140,000 per year. Before 1990, less than 10 percent of immigrants were admitted because

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of their job skills. Due to the Immigration Act of 1990, approximately 21 per cent of new immigrants are currently admitted each year under this consideration. The 140,000 employment-based visas granted to the principal immigrants and their families were allocated under a system of five preference (Yale-Loehr, 1991).

The 1990 Immigration and Nationality Act also revised non-immigrant visas, especially with regards to the H-1B that is used to admit, on a temporary basis, migrants who seek employment in "special occupations" requiring highly specialized knowledge and who possess at least one bachelor's degree or its equivalent. This visa is initially granted for three years, may be renewed for three additional years, and may open the door to legal permanent residence (Yale-Loehr, 1991).

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed in 1992 by the governments of the United States, Canada and Mexico led to the creation of the Treaty National (TN) visa program aimed at facilitating the temporary movement of skilled professionals between Canada, Mexico and the United States. The TN program grants non-immigrant visas to business visitors, investors, intra-company transferees and professionals in close to 70 categories. However, this visa does not lead to legal permanent residence (Alarcón Acosta, 2007).

Research has shown that not all skilled migrants obtain employment that match their level of education which lead to a "brain waste" situation. Chaloff and Lemaître (2009: 13-39) found that between 2005 and 2006, only 55 percent of skilled immigrants in most developed countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) were able to obtain jobs that corresponded to their level of schooling. In the United States, 53 percent of skilled migrants managed to obtain professional employment in the same period. Batalova, Fix and Creticos (2008) estimate that more than 1.3 million college-educated immigrants in the United States are either unemployed or working as dishwashers, security guards, and taxi drivers, which represents one in five skilled immigrants of the labor force.

To what extent are Mexican skilled immigrants in a brain waste situation in the United States? From a comparative perspective, findings suggest that skilled Mexican immigrants residing in the United States have lower English proficiency and a low percentage of them have post-graduate education. Another limitation is the mismatch between their university education and the specialized areas that have a high labor demand such as health care and technology. On the other hand, their use of immigrant and non-immigrant visas is limited (Calva Sánchez and Alarcón, 2015).

Lozano Ascencio, Gandini and Ramírez-García (2015) found that the U.S. labor market rewards Mexican postgraduates trained in Science, Technology, Engineering and Technology (STEM) and young people under 40 years of age. Likewise, the labor market favors access to highly-skilled occupations for both Mexican women with

postgraduate degrees and those with doctoral studies. Finally, the labor market punishes postgraduates who studied in Mexico as well as those who do not have U.S. citizenship.

Reinforcing the notion that skilled Mexican immigrant women are in a better position in the labor market than their male counterparts, Ramírez-García and Tigau (2018) argue that the proportion of Mexican immigrant women who manage to enter a highly-skilled occupation is higher than among men. However, these Mexican women enter the workforce in a disadvantageous situation compared to native women and other immigrant women such as those from Asia.

Labor Integration of Skilled Mexican Immigrants in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Region: the Quantitative Approach

In 2008, the year when the global recession shook the U.S. economy, there were an estimated 11.6 million Mexican immigrants residing there. Among them, there were seven million undocumented persons who constituted 59 percent of the 11.9 million estimated unauthorized population, according to Passel and D'Vera Cohn (2008). The researchers also noticed that the unauthorized immigrant population grew more slowly in the period 2005–2008 than it did earlier in the decade. In fact, during this period, the inflow of undocumented immigrants fell below that of legal permanent residents.

In terms of authorized immigration, Graph 1 shows that in 2008, The United States, under different categories, admitted 189,989 Mexican immigrants, which is the highest number in the 2003–2012 period. This graph also shows that immigration from Mexico is dominated by family reunification under family preferences or for being immediate relatives of U.S. citizens. In contrast, a very low percentage of immigrants were admitted under the employment preference system.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area is a global region whose economy has attracted many skilled and non-skilled immigrants from around the world. It is the most important destination for international immigrants—surpassing New York—and it is known for its financial services, thriving entertainment industry and the degraded and decentralized manufacturing sector.

Since the dawn of the post-industrial era, at the end of the twentieth century, labor demand has changed drastically, polarizing the labor market into which immigrants integrate. On the one hand, there are specialized jobs that require workers with advanced levels of education, while on the other hand, labor-intensive jobs

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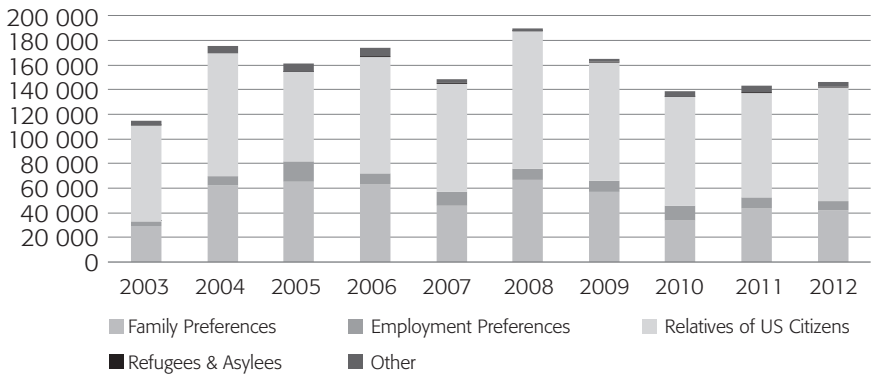
such as child care and cleaning services require workers with low education levels (Sassen, 1993; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996).

Graph 1
MEXICAN LEGAL PERMANENT RESIDENTS ADMITTED TO THE USA
BY CLASS OF ADMISSION (2003-2012)



Source: Own calculations of the American Community Survey, 2005, 2007 and 2008 (Ruggles et al., 2003-2012).

The technology industry cluster that includes the biomedical, digital information and environmental industries spearhead the Los Angeles metropolitan region's revitalized economy. Another important set of clusters is the entertainment industry, which includes film and videogame production, tourism, and international trade (Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation, 2009). Table 1 shows that the largest part of the labor force in the region is employed in tourism and hospitality, in business and professional services, as well as in direct international trade (Galicia Bretón Mora, 2012).

According to the 2007 American Community Survey, there were 17.7 million inhabitants in the Los Angeles metropolitan area and nearly one third of them (5.7 million) were foreign born. The Los Angeles region has long been a preferred destination for Mexican immigrants, of which there were 2.6 million living in the region in 2007, representing 45 percent of all immigrants (Alarcón Acosta et al., 2012).

With data from the American Community Survey, Table 2 reveals that the Global Recession did not affect the employment of Mexican skilled immigrants in professional occupations in 2005, 2007, and 2008. The percentage of employment of skilled Mexican migrants in professional occupations remained almost constant. In 2005,

before the start of the recession, it was 48.8 percent. It dropped slightly in 2007 to 45.7 percent, and in 2008 it increased to 46.3 percent. Consequently, the average number of skilled Mexican migrants considered in a brain waste situation remained at around 53 percent.

Table 1
ANNUAL AVERAGE NON-FARM EMPLOYMENT OF MAIN INDUSTRIES IN THE LOS ANGELES METROPOLITAN AREA, 2007

Industry	Total Employees	Rate by County (%)				
		Los Angeles	Orange	Riverside-San Bernardino	Ventura	Total
Tourism and Hospitality	691,600	66.0	17.3	14.0	2.7	100
Business and Professional Services[1]	476,900	60.4	25.1	11.7	2.8	100
Direct International Trade[2]	467,800	60.0	17.7	19.3	2.9	100
Wholesale Trade/ Logistics[3]	350,700	56.7	25.2	13.9	4.1	100
Entertainment	280,600	94.8	2.7	1.9	0.7	100
Technology[4]	259,100	58.5	30.8	5.8	4.9	100

[1] Includes activities related to moving commodities in and out of the customs district. Does not include any manufacturing activities.
[2] Includes computer and electronics manufacturing; aerospace products manufacturing; software publishing; internet services; computer system design; wholesale electronic markets, agents, and brokers; and scientific and technical consulting.
[3] Excludes insurance.
[4] Includes law, accounting, architecture & engineering, specialized design services, and management consulting.

Source: Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation (2009).

In accordance with this, Jorge Martínez Pizarro (2010) found that the negative impact of unemployment in the United States affected unskilled migrants more strongly than skilled migrants in the period 2007–2009. Likewise, he found that the loss of jobs during the crisis was not uniform, since sectors such as healthcare, education, and social services increased their employment, because the specialization they demand was not usually covered by native workers.

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Table 2
MAIN OCCUPATIONS OF EMPLOYED SKILLED MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE LOS ANGELES METROPOLITAN AREA, 2005-2008

	2005		2007		2008	
	Population	(%)	Population	(%)	Population	(%)
Labor Force Employed[1]	70,119	100.0	82,441	100.0	84,931	100.0
Management, Professional and Related Occupations	34,248	48.8	37,676	45.7	39,314	46.3
Service, Sales and Office Occupations	16,007	22.8	19,456	23.6	19,254	22.7
Cleaning, Food Preparation and Serving Occupations	4,368	6.2	8,162	9.9	7,856	9.2
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Occupations	162	0.2	330	0.4	972	1.1
Construction, Extraction, Maintenance and Repair Occupations	7,304	10.4	6,348	7.7	7,343	8.6
Production, Transportation and Material Moving Occupations	7,733	11.0	10,388	12.6	10,050	11.8
Military Occupations	297	0.4	82	0.1	142	0.2

[1] Mexico born persons 25 years of age and over witn at least 16 years of education.

Source: Own calculations of the American Community Survey, 2005, 2007 and 2008 (Ruggles et al., 2003-2012).

The Labor Market Experiences of Documented and Undocumented Skilled Mexican Immigrants: the Qualitative Approach

In this section, we analyze the experiences of 20 male and female Mexican immigrants in the labor market who resided in the Los Angeles metropolitan area in 2008. These immigrants who were born in the states of Zacatecas, Oaxaca and Veracruz, completed at least 16 years of schooling, including university studies in Mexico. In most cases, they obtained a university degree that facilitated their professional practice in their home country.

We decided to interview migrants from Zacatecas, Oaxaca and Veracruz because, in general terms, migrants from these three states arrived to Los Angeles at different times and historical conjunctures and therefore have heterogeneous immigration

histories, diverse legal immigration status, different access to the labor market, and diverse access to social networks. Zacatecas has had an emblematic century-old migration history to the United States. Due to the state's high volume of migrants and their early arrival, a large portion of them are legal permanent residents or naturalized citizens. Oaxaca is located in southern Mexico and is home to 20 percent of the national indigenous population. Migrants from Oaxaca began to arrive to the United States in large numbers during the 1980s and 1990s. Migration from Veracruz coincides with the period of increased border enforcement that began in late 1993 in the United States. Many of these migrants entered the United States illegally and have not been able to obtain permanent residence (Alarcón Acosta et al., 2012).

The growing number of Mexicans with higher education levels in the migration flow to the United States is explained in part by greater access to university education in Mexico. Between 1980 and 2005, according to census data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2005), the proportion of Mexicans 25 years or older with a university education grew from 3 percent in 1980 to 11.4 percent in 2005. University education is usually longer in Mexico than in the United States, lasting five or six years because many programs require a thesis for completion. This explains why some of our interviewees had not graduated at the time of the interview despite having completed university studies.

This section analyzes interviewees' labor market integration experiences by dividing them into three categories based on the following immigration status at the time of the interview in 2008: naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, and undocumented. In tables 3, 4, and 5, we summarized the most important socioeconomic and immigration characteristics of our interviewees according to their immigration status, sex, age, state of origin, year of arrival to the United States, field of education, education in the United States, occupation in 2008, and type of occupation (professional or unskilled). In addition, we present some case studies in each section to further illustrate the factors that have affected the migrant holding a professional or unskilled occupation during the great recession.

Naturalized Citizens

Table 3 shows the occupation and immigration characteristics of eight skilled immigrants who were U.S. naturalized citizens in 2008. Interestingly, while there are four immigrants from Zacatecas and three from Oaxaca in the group, there is only one from Veracruz. This suggests that migrants from Zacatecas and Oaxaca had a longer presence in Los Angeles, and hence were more likely to become U.S. citizens. Out of

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the eight interviewees, six held professional occupations and two obtained unskilled occupations.

Ricardo is from Zacatecas and has worked many years for a company that provides large engine maintenance services. After he graduated as an electrical engineer, in part due to his knowledge of English, he started working for a U.S. company in Mexico City. After a few years, he requested to be transferred to a plant located in Los Angeles, where he arrived with a temporary visa for intra-company transferees as a mechanical engineer. Furthermore, Ricardo continued updating his training through courses and conferences. He arrived in Los Angeles in the late 1970s, became a legal permanent resident, and later a United States citizen.

Table 3
OCCUPATION AND IMMIGRATION CHARACTERISTICS OF U.S. NATURALIZED CITIZENS AMONG MEXICAN SKILLED IMMIGRANTS, 2008

Name	Sex	Age	State of Origin	Year of Arrival	Field of Education in Mexico	Studies in the United States	Current Employment	
							Occupation[1]	Type of Occupation[2]
R	M	57	ZAC	1977	Electrical Engineering		Mechanical Engineer	Skilled
C	M	49	ZAC	1978	Industrial Engineering		Entrepreneur Automotive Painter	Skilled
G	M	46	ZAC	1986	Agricultural Engineering		Forestry Specialist	Skilled
V	M	60	VER	1986	Medicine		Children Entertainment Assistant	Unskilled
M	M	50	OAX	1987	Economics	BA Degree	Security Supervisor	Unskilled
A	F	42	ZAC	1989	Chemistry	BA Degree	High School Teacher	Skilled
G	M	33	OAX	1997	Economics	Master's Degree	Entrepreneur Restaurant Owner	Skilled
E	F	37	OAX	2002	Architecture		Architect	Skilled

[1] Standard Occupational Classification 2010 in http://www.bls.gov/soc/soc_structure_2010.pdf (June 2009).

[2] Occupation Clasification by Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix and Peter Creticos (2008).

Source: Survey of Skilled Mexican Immigrants in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, 2008 (Galicia Bretón Mora, 2012).

Eréndira is from Oaxaca and moved to study architecture in Mexico City, where she practiced her profession for many years. She arrived in Los Angeles and took advantage of her legal permanent residence, which she obtained through family reunification. Since her arrival to Los Angeles, she took architecture refresher courses that gave her access to professional networks. Her first job was an administrative position, until she was able to become an "informal" architect. Although her studies in Mexico have not been officially recognized, she was part of a small group of architects who support each other in securing projects. She obtained her U.S. citizenship a few years ago.

Cruz is from Zacatecas, where he received an undergraduate degree in industrial engineering. Despite his education, after his arrival in Los Angeles, he was not able to obtain a professional job. He first worked in a slaughterhouse, and later at a car wash. He was able to obtain these jobs thanks to the support of his relatives. Eventually, he learned how to paint cars professionally, and has specialized in this field. He became an entrepreneur and started a business in 2008, painting cars for an important international firm. He obtained legal permanent residence and then became a naturalized citizen.

Vicente studied medicine in Mexico City, where he graduated as a physician and surgeon and returned to Veracruz to practice his profession. In the mid-1980s, he arrived in Los Angeles with a tourist visa, fleeing the economic crisis in Mexico. His first job was as a dishwasher, and although he worked as a nurse for a long time, he never revalidated his studies or learned English. He became a U.S. citizen and began to work in his son's company providing entertainment for children.

Mauricio was born in Oaxaca and moved to Mexico City, where he obtained a degree in economics. During the Mexican economic crisis of the 1980s, he emigrated to Los Angeles where he lived with his siblings. He worked as a dishwasher at a restaurant where his brother also worked. Subsequently, he furthered his education by obtaining another BA degree from a technological institute. In spite of this, he began working as a janitor and in 2008 he was working as a security supervisor. He obtained his U.S. citizenship in the early 1990s.

Legal Permanent Residents

Of the six interviewees who were legal permanent residents in 2008, four held professional occupations and two were employed in unskilled occupations in manufacturing and hotel services (see table 4).

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Table 4
OCCUPATION AND IMMIGRATION CHARACTERISTICS OF LEGAL PERMANENT RESIDENTS AMONG MEXICAN SKILLED IMMIGRANTS, 2008

Name	Sex	Age	State of Origin	Year of Arrival	Field of Education in Mexico	Studies in the United States	Current Employment	
							Occupation[1]	Type of Occupation[2]
A	M	50	VER	1986	Tourism		Manufacturing Worker	Unskilled
I	F	39	ZAC	1988	Accounting	BA Degree	Elementary School Principal	Skilled
M	F	46	OAX	1988	Communication		Communication and Marketing Specialist	Skilled
A	M	53	VER	1989	Journalism		Self-Employed Event Organizer	Skilled
A	F	36	VER	1998	Sociology		Hotel Worker	Unskilled
J	M	42	ZAC	2003	Teaching Mathematics	BA Degree	High School Teacher	Skilled

[1] Standard Occupational Classification 2010 in http://www.bls.gov/soc/soc_structure_2010.pdf (June 2009).

[2] Occupation Clasification by Batalova, Fix and Creticos (2008).

Source: Survey of Skilled Mexican Immigrants in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, 2008 (Galicia Bretón Mora, 2012).

Iris is from Zacatecas and as soon as she got her accounting degree in Mexico, she started working at a federal bank before emigrating to the Los Angeles metropolitan area. She obtained her GED diploma and went on to college to study graphic design. Her first job in Los Angeles was as a babysitter, but she later became a webpage design teacher. Iris continued studying at a university to fulfill her aspiration of becoming an elementary school principal.

Alejandro is from Veracruz. He studied journalism in Mexico City and worked as a reporter for some time. During his employment at a media company, he was offered an opportunity to work as a correspondent in Los Angeles. He arrived in Los Angeles with a temporary work visa as an intra-company transferee at the end of the 1980s. In 2008, he started a small company to organize social events for companies.

Marcela is from Oaxaca and studied communication. At the end of the 1980s, she moved to Tijuana and later to Los Angeles. Since her arrival in the United States, she has taken several communication and marketing courses. She worked as a car sales person at a dealership and in 2008 she started a marketing and media company that caters to several small companies.

Arturo is from Veracruz and studied tourism without obtaining a degree. He is also an "immigrant of the crisis," since he was greatly affected by the economic crisis of 1982. He arrived in Los Angeles as an undocumented immigrant but was able to obtain permanent residence by marrying a U.S. citizen. At first, he worked as an assistant waiter and afterwards he obtained several jobs at restaurants. He finally found employment at a company that manufactures medical furniture as a low-skilled manufacturing worker.

Adelaida was born in Veracruz and studied sociology without obtaining a degree. When she arrived in Los Angeles, she was undocumented and her English proficiency was limited. She was employed at a clothing manufacturing company as a low-skilled worker and subsequently worked as a caregiver for the elderly. She was later employed as a hotel maid.

Undocumented Immigrants

Table 5 shows the labor market experiences of six undocumented skilled immigrants. In spite of their undocumented immigration status, two female immigrants were able to obtain professional occupations in the health care sector and the other as an "informal" civil engineer thanks to the support of professional colleagues in the United States. The remaining four immigrants held unskilled occupations at the time of the interview in 2008.

Paola is from Veracruz. She graduated as a health professional in Mexico City and practiced her profession in her native town. In the mid 1990s, she decided to go to the United States without legal documentation with the idea of saving money to start her own practice in Mexico. She looked for work as a house cleaner but was lucky enough to land a job as a health professional assistant. Subsequently, a colleague told her she could revalidate her studies. Paola paid a substantial amount of money to obtain her professional license and in 2008 she was working in her field and continued to be undocumented.

Carolina is from Zacatecas and became a civil engineer in Mexico. Despite being undocumented, she was able to practice her career informally. She arrived in Los Angeles in the beginning of the 2000s and was not able to revalidate her professional studies in the United States. For this reason, her first job was as a cashier, and she subsequently began working with other civil engineers who helped her practice her profession.

Lorenzo is from Veracruz and graduated as a mechanical engineer. He worked for Pemex, Mexico's state-owned oil company, until union conflicts forced him to

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leave his job. Unemployed, he decided to emigrate to Los Angeles where family members had settled. When he arrived, he started working as a dishwasher at a restaurant and at other menial jobs. He could not revalidate his studies and in 2008 he was self-employed managing a small handicrafts business.

Table 5
OCCUPATION AND IMMIGRATION CHARACTERISTICS OF UNDOCUMENTED MEXICAN SKILLED IMMIGRANTS, 2008

Name	Sex	Age	State of Origin	Year of Arrival	Field of Education in Mexico	Studies in the United States	Current Employment	
							Occupation[1]	Type of Occupation[2]
L	M	44	VER	1990	Mechanical Engineering		Self-Employed Handcraft Business	Unskilled
R	M	40	OAX	1993	Industrial Engineering	GED Diploma	Restaurant Manager	Unskilled
M	F	40	OAX	1993	Industrial Engineering	GED Diploma	Healthcare Support Worker	Unskilled
P	F	47	VER	1996	Health Professional	Revalidation of Studies in Mexico	Health Professional	Skilled
C	F	42	ZAC	2001	Civil Engineering		Civil Engineering	Skilled
O	M	30	VER	2003	Communication		Retail Salesperson	Unskilled

[1] Standard Occupational Classification 2010 in http://www.bls.gov/soc/soc_structure_2010.pdf (June 2009).

[2] Occupation Clasification by Batalova, Fix and Creticos (2008).

Source: Survey of Skilled Mexican Immigrants in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, 2008 (Galicia Bretón Mora, 2012).

Ramiro studied industrial engineering in Oaxaca and in the early 1990s emigrated to Los Angeles with a tourist visa in search of better job opportunities. On the flight to Los Angeles, he met another industrial engineer who had graduated from the same university who helped him get a job at a manufacturing company. His job at the factory was the closest he came to working in his field. He later worked at a restaurant as a delivery man, and worked his way up to manager. In 2008, Ramiro said that his undocumented status affected his ability to obtain a professional job.

Osvaldo is from Veracruz and obtained a communication degree in Mexico where he worked in the public and private sectors. In 2000, he decided to emigrate to the United States to live with his parents. He attempted to obtain a tourist visa but was denied; as a result, he decided to cross the border illegally. When he arrived in Los Angeles, he worked as a low-skilled worker at a manufacturing company. In 2008, Osvaldo was working at a furniture store as a salesman.

Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the labor integration of skilled Mexican immigrants in the Los Angeles metropolitan region reveals that these immigrants were not negatively affected by the global recession of 2008. However, some of the Mexican skilled immigrants were in a brain waste situation since they held occupations that did not match their level of education. The experiences of our 20 interviewees from Zacatecas, Oaxaca and Veracruz, regardless of their immigration status, demonstrated that 8 out of the 20 held unskilled occupations at the time of the interview in 2008.

In another important finding of our research, we learned that legal immigration status turned out to be the most important factor in differentiating those who obtained a skilled occupation and those who did not. For this reason, 10 out of the 14 skilled immigrants who were naturalized citizens or legal permanent residents had a skilled occupation at the time of the interview in 2008; conversely, only two out of the six undocumented skilled immigrants held a skilled occupation.

The cases of Paola and Carolina are important because they were able to find skilled occupations in spite of their undocumented immigration status. Immigrants who obtained professional occupations in the United States, including those who were undocumented, were able to strategically use their investment in human capital and their access to professional social networks. This is another important finding of our research. Skilled occupations held by interviewees in 2008 were commonly obtained through professional networks that skilled immigrants were able to access outside the influence of social networks constructed with other Mexican immigrants. These social networks built on kinship, friendship and community of origin were useful for skilled immigrants to get their first unskilled jobs in Los Angeles (Massey et al., 1987). However, these networks seem to negatively affect skilled immigrants who do not successfully transcend them since they lead to low-paying jobs. Professional social networks proved to be efficient in providing relevant information about study revalidation and skilled employment opportunities.

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Interestingly, few interviewees benefited from the 1990 Immigration and Nationality Act, which among other things sought to promote the permanent and temporary immigration of skilled persons. Only two of our interviewees were admitted into the United States with L-1 visas for intra-company transferees. None of our interviewees held a non-immigrant H-1B or TN visa. This suggests that many of our interviewees did not have any professional contacts before entering the United States. Investment in human capital, by means of additional training or studies in the United States, also contributed to obtaining professional occupations.

Our interviewees were skilled immigrants because they completed at least 16 years of education. However, in most cases, they developed modest educational and professional careers in the United States. For this reason they do not belong to the highly-skilled group of migrants who participate in a global labor market that according to Manuel Castells (1996) is reserved for a small, but growing segment of professionals and scientists who are involved in innovative research and development, cutting-edge engineering, financial management, advanced business services, and entertainment. However, in spite of brain waste, some skilled Mexican immigrants manage to get ahead in Los Angeles Metropolitan region.

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