

Linking mass emigration, violence and human rights violations in Mexico

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Elsewhere in this forum [Natalia Saltalamacchia](#), [Alejandro Anaya](#) and [Jorge Castañeda](#) provide compelling evidence that international human rights norms have made in-roads with the Mexican public. In theory, this should make it more difficult for representatives of the state to abuse citizens with impunity. Despite this, [human rights violations](#) in Mexico have increased dramatically in the last decade.

In fact, since 2007 more than 26,000 people have disappeared in Mexico, and the country's [National Human Rights Commission \(CNDH\)](#) is currently investigating 2,443 of these cases for alleged involvement of state agents. As FLASCO researcher [Karina Ansolabehere](#) recently argued, Mexico finds itself “at a critical juncture”, in which the state is being pressured by a disconcerted public to improve its deplorable human rights record. A large part of the challenge is simply creating safe and confidential avenues for citizens to transparently report violations. In the short run, this will help the public gain a better understanding of the types of abuses that are occurring. In the long run, however, Mexico must focus on addressing the underlying causes of human rights violations.

Identifying what triggers human rights violations in Mexico is the first step to curbing future transgressions. With that in mind, I believe that mass emigration helps explain, at least in part, the recent escalation of human rights violations in Mexico.

Although I have studied central Mexico extensively, my focus has never been on human rights violations per se. Nonetheless, the results of my research point to a strong connection between mass emigration, violence, and human rights violations in the Mexican countryside. Specifically, I find evidence to suggest that mass emigration out of Mexico contributes to the type of political environment in which official accountability is low, thus increasing the potential for human rights violations.



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A group of Mexican youths en route to the US-Mexican border. Does mass emigration out of Mexico contribute to the country's susceptibility to human rights violations?

In January 2015 I met a man in his mid-thirties—whom I will call Rodrigo—that works for a municipal presidency in southern Guanajuato. Rodrigo, who spent several years working in the US, showed me around a handful of emigration-prone towns along the Guanajuato-Michoacán border. He made one observation in particular that caught my attention.

'The problem is, you see, that the most ambitious people are the first to leave. And that's problematic. The ones that leave are the ones that would be most capable of pushing for real change around here.' "The problem is, you see, that the most ambitious people are the first to leave. And that's problematic. The ones that leave are the ones that would be most capable of pushing for real change around here," contended Rodrigo as we walked down a dusty street a mere 200 yards from Michoacán. "But they leave, and worse yet, they send back money, which takes the pressure off local officials, who have always been corrupt, but now, because of the migrants and their remittances, they are able to act as they please. You understand? There's no accountability in these regions anymore. At least before you had the ejidos [communal lands] but now there's nothing. It's a terrible cycle that just repeats itself over and over again."

Five years ago, I might have doubted Rodrigo's claim. However, in the past several years I have spent a great deal of time exploring the relationship between emigration and development in central Mexico, and

Rodrigo's words resonated with conversations I had with other community members, as well as with the empirical studies I've conducted.

The facts line up something like this. As migrants leave to the US, local communities are deprived of the young, motivated, and ambitious individuals that would be most likely to pressure for change in their villages. In time, migrants do send back substantial quantities of cash. However, remittances have two immediate effects: (1) They allow family members of migrants to conspicuously consume products they previously could not afford (televisions, cars, computers, telephones, etc.), and (2) They incentivize others in the village to migrate so that they can also access the type of life afforded to those with family in the US. In fact, in my own research in Guanajuato and Michoacán I find that as remittances go up in a locality, [school attendance rates drop](#). The latter is especially true for teenage boys, who look to emulate the young men that left before them. (See [Las Migraciones](#) and [Migration and Education](#).) Moreover, although per capita income improves slightly as remittances increase, employment rates tend to drop in municipalities with high emigration rates. Finally, as more people leave a town, [electoral turnout actually falls](#) in subsequent years, indicating that regions that receive financial support from diaspora communities may have less incentive to pressure the state for resources.

In a sense, mass emigration provides local villages with the economic capital it previously lacked while simultaneously depriving communities of the type of human capital (education) and social capital (collective engagement) that would best allow those left behind to capitalize on their newfound prosperity. Over the last several generations this cycle has left the Mexican countryside looking something like a well-maintained ghost town, in which remittance-funded homes sit empty most of the year and local economies grind to a halt in every month except December, when los paisanos return home for the holidays. And this arrangement might work out all right if all working age individuals were able to migrate, but that's not the case.

"Not everyone can try their luck. And for those that receive remittances, well, everything works out ok but for the rest, it's tough. I've got a job right now but in the past I've run 'errands' for the local cartels because that was the only way to feed my family," explained a young man from Moreleón, Guanajuato in 2012.

"Look, you have to understand one thing. Here there are two possibilities to get ahead in life...you go to the US or you join a cartel. Y punto."

"But what about the local government? Don't they generate jobs?" I asked.

He smiled. "Like I said, you go to the US or you join a cartel."

