

BORDER BRIEF

The Changing Face of Mexican Migrants in California: Oaxacan Mixtecs and Zapotecs in Perspective

By Sarah Poole

Brief Overview

Over the last 20 years, there has been a dramatic change in the social and ethnic makeup of Mexican migrants crossing into the United States. It is estimated that over 100,000 Mixtecs and Zapotecs, indigenous peoples from the southern state of Oaxaca, have migrated to the United States in search of a better future. It is estimated that by the year 2010, Mixtecs and Zapotecs will comprise 20% of the agricultural labor force in the United States, primarily to California. In San Diego County alone, there are between 10,000 and 14,000 Mixtec migrants. This report traces historical precursors to their migration, identifies gaps in the provision of social services, and suggests key policy issues that need to be addressed.

The Political Economic Context of Oaxacan Migration

Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, many Mixtecs from the southern state of Oaxaca were recruited to work in export agriculture in the northwestern Mexican states of Baja California and Sinaloa. For the next few decades, two groups of neighboring Oaxacan indigenous people, the Mixtecs and Zapotecs, migrated to northern Mexico in search of work opportunities. Many Mixtecs settled in satellite communities in the north, while Zapotecs generally returned home after harvest seasons.



Source: www.mexconnect.com/mex_/oaxaca/mapoaxaca.html

However, the Mexican job market took a turn for the worse during the economic crisis of the 1980s, when Mexican inflation averaged 100% from 1982-88. The agricultural export industry suffered from the ensuing ripple effects, including soaring unemployment and reduced social services. These conditions, as well as a major downturn following the

1994 peso crisis, drove many Mixtecs and Zapotecs to search for work in the United States to support their families at home in the 1980s and 1990s.

Where is home?

Mixtec and Zapotec immigrants mainly come from the state of Oaxaca, is located on the southern Pacific coast of Mexico and bordered by the states of Puebla, Veracruz and Guerrero. Oaxaca, Mexico's tenth largest state, is home to more than three million residents within an area roughly the size of Indiana. It is estimated that 50% of these residents speak one of 15 indigenous languages, including Mixteco, Zapoteco, Mixe, Huave, Mazateco, and Chinanteco. There are also over 90 regional variants of these languages in Oaxaca, making it Mexico's most linguistically diverse state. The two largest indigenous groups are Mixtec and Zapotec, numbering around 450,000 and 347,000 respectively.

With 15 indigenous languages and over 90 regional variants, Oaxaca is Mexico's most linguistically diverse state...

The Mixtecs and Zapotecs have traditionally lived in relatively close proximity to each other; however the evolution of their communities has followed different paths. Mixtec society is historically agrarian-based with autonomous communities that existed without a central governing city until the Conquest. In contrast, the Zapotecs had several regional centers, including the impressive sites of Monte Alban, Mitla and Zaachila. Thus, the Oaxaca region is of great historical and cultural significance, with very large populations and complex civilizations dating back more than 3,000 years.

Migration Factors in Oaxaca

Today, the Mixtecs and the Zapotecs face extreme marginalization within their own state because deeply entrenched social inequality and discrimination. This has been coupled with declines in agricultural production, ecological destruction, and lack of infrastructure, which force indigenous Oaxacans to migrate in search of better opportunities.

For the most part, Mixtecs and Zapotecs currently live in agrarian societies faced with serious problems. Massive deforestation and erosion in Oaxaca severely limit agricultural production. These problems began with the introduction of new technologies, such as the oxen-draw plow, during Spanish colonialism. Later, land redistribution following the Mexican Revolution was complicated by competing claims from neighboring communities and a lack of legal documentation regarding land boundaries. Today, Mixtecs and Zapotecs confront increased production costs (seed, fertilizers, and transportation), decreased land availability, land tenure inequality, and declining crop prices.

The amount of arable land available in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca provides food for only as much as four months of the year. Also, a massive fire in the mid 1990s burned much of the area known as the Mixteca Alta, which left many communities devastated by the deforestation of arable land. Some of these effects include erosion after the rainy

season and decreased soil quality. Lastly, the Mixtec region of Oaxaca is one of the most economically underdeveloped areas in all of Mexico. The lack of infrastructure and job opportunities throughout the state poses significant challenges for indigenous peoples. Oaxaca, traditionally one of the poorest states in Mexico, has never had an economic infrastructure beyond an internal market system. Only in the last 15 years has Oaxaca begun to see some economic stability, primarily due to tourism.

There are some options at home for generating income in Mixtec and Zapotec areas. Mixtec communities in the Central Valley are known for palm weaving. Zapotec communities of Teotitlan and Santa Ana del Valle weave wool rugs. The handful of communities that produce such handicrafts are located in close proximity to Oaxaca City and the tourist industry. However, the majority of Mixtec and Zapotec communities are dependent on agriculture, which leaves few economic alternatives beyond migration.

The deteriorating ecological and economic conditions in Oaxaca are key migration factors. Many indigenous people turn to economic opportunities in the United States in order to financially sustain their families at home.

Migration Facts and Figures

For at least 7.5% of Mexican immigrants to the United States, Spanish is not their first language. Two of the largest single ethnic groups in this category, Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca are found all over the United States including California, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Washington, Texas, South Carolina, and Illinois. There are large concentrations in certain regions. While Oaxaca sends only 2% of all Mexican migrants to the United States, Oaxacans are the largest portion (roughly 12%) of Mexican migrants in San Diego.

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There are several differences between the migration patterns of Mixtecs and Zapotecs. Mixtecs generally migrate to rural areas and work largely in the agriculture industry. In contrast, Zapotecs tend to migrate to urban areas and are employed in restaurants and factories. For the most part, Zapotecs from the Central Valley attain higher levels of education at home and tend to speak more Spanish than Mixtecs; such Zapotecs are closer to tourist areas like Mitla and Yagul. The two groups also differ in terms of how they find their employment. Mixtecs have historically been recruited by *enganchadores*, or labor recruiters, while Zapotecs chain-migrate along familial networks.

Roughly 45,000 to 55,000 Mixtecs are believed to work in agriculture in the United States, making them about 5% to 10% of the agricultural labor force. 33% are estimated to be women, in comparison to 43% female labor participation in all of Mexico. In the early 1990s, it was estimated that roughly two-thirds of Mixtec immigrants were legal immigrants who obtained documents from the 1986 Immigration and Reform Act. These numbers only include Mixtecs in the agricultural sector in rural areas. Mixtecs have also

formed satellite settlements on the migration path to the United States, particularly around Mexico City and Northern Mexico in cities like Tijuana.

Mixtecs are generally employed in the agricultural industry, working very labor-intensive jobs. They tend to work in the cultivation of flowers, citrus, avocados, tomatoes, strawberries and nurseries. Thus, in contrast to Zapotecs, Mixtecs work for shorter periods of time in different locations because they follow harvesting seasons. Studies indicate that Mixtec farm workers typically earned less than the U.S. minimum in California and Oregon in the 1990s.

Also, Mixtecs are often subjected to unfair labor standards while working in the fields because they cannot speak Spanish well. Non-indigenous Mexican migrants, or *mestizos*, sometimes tend to look down on or discriminate against Mixtecs as is often the case in Mexico. Mixtecs are frequently labeled with the derogatory term of “*indio*,” or Indian, which is associated with laziness and ineptitude. Quite often, Mixtecs are forced to pay for services that should be included under the terms of employment. In San Joaquin Valley, for example, a higher proportion of Mixtecs than *mestizos* must ride to work in supervisor’s vehicle for a fee of three to six dollars every day.

While Mixtecs tend to work in seasonal agricultural jobs, Zapotecs tend to work and settle in urban areas...

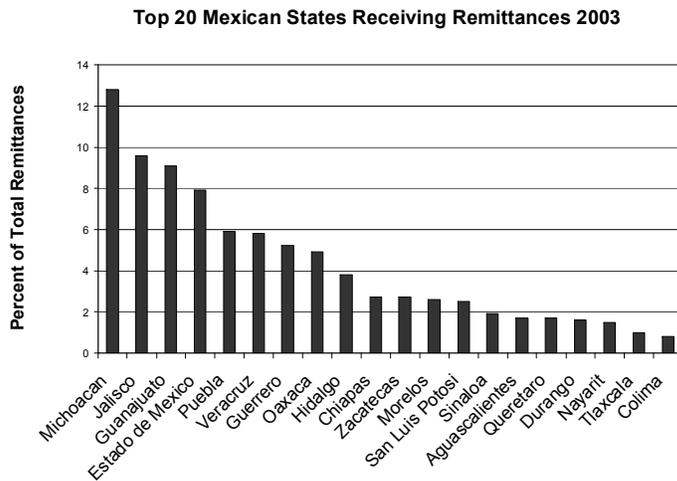
In contrast, Zapotecs tend to be better paid and more settled in large metropolitan areas. According to a recent publication by Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, titled *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, between 60,000 and 65,000 Zapotecs have settled in the Los Angeles area alone. Unlike Mixtecs, Zapotec people have not established satellite communities in many other areas of Mexico, with the exception of Mexico City, Baja California and Veracruz. In addition, Zapotecs in the United States are not subjected to such extreme labor violations as Mixtecs. In fact, because they generally work in urban areas, they experience much more upward mobility. For instance, they often move from washing dishes or bussing tables to being a chef in a restaurant, all of which can be accomplished without being fluent in English. Later, they sometimes go on to own their own restaurant, as is the case for many Zapotecs in the Los Angeles area. In short, the different migration and settlement patterns of Mixtecs and Zapotecs appear to have very distinct results.

Remittances and Migrant Impacts on Sending Communities

Once Mixtecs and Zapotecs establish themselves in the United States, familial and trans-national community ties remain quite strong. Remittances refer to the practice of sending money back to the community of origin. In a study conducted in 1988, it was determined that the value of remittances sent back to the region exceeded the value of agricultural production. Remittances are also of great importance to the Mexican economy. It is estimated that Mexican migrants send back a total of 6-8 billion US dollars each year to Mexico.

It is difficult to assess the exact application and effect of remittances in Oaxaca. Several small-scale studies suggest that remittances in Oaxaca are used for immediate uses such as food, housing, clothing, and agri-cultural expenses. Re-mittances have allowed a number of communities to stabilize and, in some cases, flourish. However, research also indicates that re-mittances are not substantial enough to support significant local economic development. There are several community groups that sponsor infrastructure development, however these projects require long periods of time to generate substantial funds.

In the following graph, the top 20 Mexican states that receive remittances are listed to illustrate their percentage of total remittances. In 2003, Oaxaca ranked eighth among the top 20 Mexican states receiving remittances.



Source: Coronado, Roberto. "Workers Remittances to Mexico" in *Business Frontier*. El Paso: Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2004, Issue 1.

Many banks and financial institutions have made a concerted effort to facilitate the flow of remittances back to Mexico, with a considerable shift from more costly wire services to the use

of ATM cards and other low-cost services. Still, the process of sending back remittances to Mexico remains problematic for many Oaxacan immigrants because they tend not to trust banking systems or money wiring services. For many, the preferred method to transfer money is simply to have friends or family take it back on a return trip to Mexico.

Other non-financial factors –new ideas, identities, and social capital– have also had significant impacts on migrant-sending communities in Oaxaca. One example, is the practice of calling back migrants to serve in elected community positions after they have established themselves in the United States. The socio-cultural consequences are significant, since such practices often redefine traditional notions of community by importing ideas and behaviors from the United States. Indeed, many Oaxacan communities have redefined their notion of citizenship by trans-nationally incorporating community members that reside in the United States.

Access to Social Services in the United States and Mexico

There is little research concerning Mixtec and Zapotec access to basic social services in the United States. This is largely a reflection of the problems of data gathering related to undocumented migration in general and Oaxacan migration in particular. Collection of data on migrants is generally difficult in the United States because of seasonal relocation and the fear of deportation. Obtaining statistics on indigenous Mexican migrants magnifies these problems because those migrants that are counted in official censuses are

often simply labeled as “Latino” or “other.” More effective collection of population statistics is needed in order to properly assess level of diversity in Mexican migration and the needs in different communities at health clinics, hospitals, and schools.

Still, there are a number of significant trends that can be identified about service needs and impacts. In the area of healthcare, for example, even Mixtecs or Zapotecs that do seek out assistance often find they are not able to obtain adequate health services in the United States. The first major obstacle is the language barrier. It is very uncommon for hospitals or healthcare clinics to have any understanding of the Mixtec or Zapotec language. Thus, even when the patient has some command of Spanish, significant misunderstandings frequently occur between doctors and patients; one study found that a Mixtec woman complaining of pain in her *corazón*, or heart, was actually experiencing discomfort in her stomach.

A second barrier involves differences in cultural perceptions about medical treatment. Throughout Latin America, *curanderos*, or medicine men and women, practice traditional medicine for common ailments that are foreign to Western medicine. For example, a common ailment among young children is called *susto*, or fright. This is traditionally treated using eggs to capture evil spirits, herbs, and specific chants. A third problem, and perhaps the most limiting factor for medical treatment, is that undocumented immigrants are only covered under MediCal for issues related to pregnancy and emergency health problems. This makes it very difficult for immigrants who suffer chronic ailments like diabetes to receive essential preventative medicine or supervision.

Meanwhile, Mixtec and Zapotec access to education is just beginning to be documented and addressed. Recently, in San Diego City Schools, census information was altered to incorporate a category for “Mixtec” and “Mexican Indian other”. Currently, there are 11 Mixtecs and one “Mexican Indian Other” enrolled in San Diego City Schools. However, actual numbers might be higher because parents may fail to properly complete forms for their children. Many Mixtecs and Zapotecs are literate in Spanish only up until the third or fourth grade level, if they have knowledge of Spanish at all. This leaves school officials to determine the origin of schoolchildren and respond to their educational needs.

There is increasing interest, especially in San Diego universities, in offering Mexican indigenous language training. San Diego State University (SDSU) has offered Mixtec language classes since 2000, as well as summer immersion courses in Oaxaca. The University of California San Diego will begin offering Zapotec in 2005. The University of San Diego’s Center for Community Service learning also encourages students to work directly with Mixtec and Zapotec communities in San Diego in a variety of areas.

On the Mexican side of the border, there are a few concerted public and private efforts throughout Sinaloa and Baja California to provide bilingual education to indigenous migrants. In Tijuana, the Ve’E Saa Kua’a School, or House of Learning in Mixtec, provides education to Mixtecs and other indigenous groups. In addition, the state of Baja California created an Indigenous Education Department 15 years ago to meet the needs of migrants in the region.

Part of the problem for educators in the United States and Mexico is that there are several dialects of Mixtec and Zapotec languages. This makes it incredibly difficult to successfully facilitate bilingual education because different dialects of the same language often have different grammatical structures.

Transnational Indigenous Organization

As a result of the challenging circumstances that Mixtecs and Zapotecs face, they have organized both at home and in the United States. Indigenous people from southern Mexico are no strangers to organization, especially when faced with social injustice and economic crisis. One study indicates that indigenous people from throughout the “Mexican Poverty Corridor” in Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas are becoming increasingly mobilized.

Transnational Mixtec & Zapotec Activist Groups

- Coalición de Comunidades Indígenas de Oaxaca (COCIO) in Carlsbad
- Lluvia, Tequio y Alimentos
- Rising Moon (San Diego)
- California Legal Rural Assistance
- United Farm Workers
- Frente Indígena Oaxaqueña Binacional
- Comité Cívico Popular Mixteco

In the United States, a number of significant civic, social, and political organizations provide assistance to Mixtecs and Zapotecs. The Frente Indígena Oaxaqueña Binacional, the United Farm Workers and the California Legal Rural Assistance non-governmental organization work in collaboration with each other.

Some of these organizations were created entirely by and for Mixtec and Zapotec peoples, while others are American groups that provide assistance in legal and social matters.

These groups chiefly assist farm workers that have been subjected to human and labor rights violations. Some non-profits work independently, including the Rising Moon project, which operates out of San Diego. This non-profit organization provides clothing and school supplies to Mixtec communities in Baja California. Perhaps the most influential independent organization is *Lluvia, Tequio y Alimentos*, or Rain, Workday, and Food. It is sponsored by Mexican state and federal governments and the United Nations. This organization utilizes community laborers to construct water retentions projects in Mixtec communities. However, due to massive migration, the project faces shortages in labor supply.

Policy Directions

The increasing number of indigenous Oaxacans migrating to the United States points to the need to address some of the specific issues that these people face. This can only be accomplished through more effective policy initiatives and continued research targeting Oaxacan migrants.

There are specific problems in the agricultural industry, including an acute need for stricter governmental monitoring to prevent unjust labor practices. The agricultural industry relies heavily on Mexican farm workers, particularly Mixtecs, yet there are continued instances of exploitation of their labor. It would be worthwhile for lawmakers to focus attention on migrant health services as well. Programs are needed to teach healthcare staff basic words in Mixtec and Zapotec. Also, adding greater flexibility to public health programs to service migrants preventatively would help to lower costs by treating certain illnesses proactively (rather than when they convert into health emergencies).

Meanwhile, there is very little research concerning Mixtec and Zapotec access to education in the United States. In the wake of measures that required English-only immersion to classrooms (e.g., Propositions 187, 209, and 227), it would be beneficial for researchers to look at Mixtec and Zapotec student performance in relation to other immigrants. There is also a very important need for researchers to bring these issues to the public sphere so that there is ample evidence for policy-makers to make well-educated decisions concerning the needs of Mixtec and Zapotecs in the United States. Increased attention to the particular opportunities and challenges presented by Oaxacan migration may also help private sector businesses and financial institutions to relate to their potential customers.

Lastly, it is absolutely imperative to focus attention back to Mexico. Oaxacan indigenous people are leaving because of unequal access to land, lack of infrastructure, and economic underdevelopment. A collaborative effort between the United States and Mexico is needed to facilitate development projects and sustainable agricultural practices for Mixtec, Zapotec, and other migrant-sending communities to provide job opportunities at home.

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