# GUATEMALANS, SALVADORANS AND HONDURANS IN MEXICO AND U.S.

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Emigration from the three nations of the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), mainly directed to the U.S. and passing through Mexico, has continued growing in the past decade, despite the anti-migrant environment in the U.S., the many risks of crossing through Mexico and complex economic conditions. The main objective of this article is to compare and discuss the main characteristics of migrants from the NTCA in Mexico and the U.S. In the first section, the historical context and international migration dynamics in the NTCA is discussed. Using data from the Mexican and U.S. Censuses as well as the American Community Survey, the article examines the main characteristics of Mexico and the U.S. as destinations for migrants from the NTCA, comparing the demographic and labour profile of migrants in Mexico and the U.S.

La emigración de los tres países del Triángulo Norte de América Central (NTCA/siglas en inglés), dirigida principalmente a los EUA, a través de México, ha seguido creciendo en la última década, pese al ambiente anti-migrante que prevalece en los EUA, los muchos riesgos inherentes a cruzar México y condiciones económicas complejas. El objetivo principal de este artículo es comparar y discutir las características principales de los migrantes provenientes del NTCA en México y en los Estados Unidos. En la primera sección se plantea el contexto histórico y la dinámica de la migración internacional en el NTCA. Utilizando datos de los censos mexicano y estadounidense, así como la Encuesta de la Comunidad Estadounidense (American Community Survey), el artículo examina las principales características de México y de EUA como destino de las personas migrantes del NTCA, y compara el perfil demográfico y laboral de los migrantes en uno y otro país.

L'émigration des trois nations du Triangle du Nord en Amérique Centrale (TNAC), principalement dirigée vers les États-Unis et passant par le Mexique, a continué de croître au cours de la dernière décennie, malgré l'environnement anti-migrants aux États-Unis, les nombreux risques de traverser le Mexique et les conditions économiques complexes. L'objectif principal de cet article est de comparer et d'examiner les principales caractéristiques des

**migrants du Triangle du Nord au Mexique et aux États-Unis. Dans la première section, le contexte historique et la dynamique des migrations internationales dans le Triangle du Nord sont examinés. En utilisant les données des recensements mexicain et américain ainsi que de l'American Community Survey, cet article examine les principales caractéristiques du Mexique et des États-Unis en tant que destinations des migrants du Triangle du Nord, en comparant le profil démographique et professionnel des migrants au Mexique et aux États-Unis.**

## INTRODUCTION

Emigration out of the three Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) nations, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, is mainly unauthorized, directed towards the U.S. and has to cross over the Mexican territory. In the recent past, several economic and social factors pointed to a decrease in out-migration from Mexico and Central American countries. In fact, Mexican emigration has gone down significantly and it is estimated that the net migration flow from Mexico to the U.S. is very close to zero (Passel, Cohn and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). The main drivers identified for emigration decrease are the slowdown in U.S. economic growth, the rising number of deportations and the overall anti-migrant atmosphere in the U.S. In the case of migration from the Central American countries, tougher immigrant controls and higher number of apprehensions in Mexico coupled with increased violence and insecurity throughout the journey should also have lowered the number of emigrants from Central America to the U.S. However, migrant outflow from the NTCA countries has continued at high levels, leading to a persistent growth of the NTCA-born population in the U.S., while Mexican population in the U.S. has remained stable (Pederzini, et al. 2015).

The main objective of this article is to compare and discuss the main characteristics of migrants from the NTCA in Mexico and the U.S. In the first section, the historical context and international migration dynamics in the NTCA is discussed. Some of the main characteristics of Mexico and the U.S. as destinations for migrants from the NTCA are described in the second section. The third section compares the demographic and labour profile of migrants in Mexico and the U.S. The paper ends with a discussion of the main findings and some policy recommendations.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION DYNAMICS IN NTCA COUNTRIES

Migration flows from the NTCA have been produced not only by exceptional circumstances but also by long standing structural conditions in the sending countries. Economic and political conditions in the three countries of the Northern Triangle have been problematic and have generated large socio-oeconomic inequalities associated with political turmoil in each of these nations.

Guatemala, a country of high ethnic diversity, underwent a long Civil War from 1960 to 1996. The majority of victims in this war were Highland Mayans. From 1981 to 1983, 440 highland villages were destroyed and 150,000 persons disappeared (Pederzini, et al. 2015).

In Guatemala and El Salvador the economy oriented to the external markets, mainly on basic agricultural commodities, favouring large domestic producers and foreign investment. Peasants were dislocated and had to seek refuge in Honduras. In fact, due to violence in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador, Honduras received a large flow of immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s. Flows between Guatemala and the South East of Mexico have taken place historically. During the armed conflicts in Guatemala, refugee camps ran by United Nations were installed in Mexico.

The armed conflict in El Salvador caused the onset of migration flows to the U.S. However, after pacification, emigration rekindled due to longstanding economic problems and political confrontation. Natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch (1998) and the 2001 earthquake contributed to emigration flows. Since the beginning of the 21st century, increasing gang violence is the main factor generating emigration.

Honduras had a later incorporation to the flow but is nowadays the country with the highest rate of emigration to the U.S., a phenomenon fueled by drug and gang related violence (Pederzini, et al. 2015).

## MEXICO AND THE U.S. AS DESTINATION COUNTRIES

Mexico is generally considered an emigration country. Only recently Mexico's role as a country of transit, settlement and return has gained attention. Nevertheless, Mexico has hosted in the past important flows of migrants escaping political persecution. For example, between 1939 and 1950, twenty thousand Spaniards seeking refuge arrived in Mexico as part of a program sponsored by President Lazaro Cardenas (Lida 1995).

At the end of the 1970s, the upsurge of Central American migrants fleeing political instability challenged Mexican asylum policy. Mexico offered protection and assistance to all the people who had arrived in the country, sticking to its asylum tradition forged since its independent life. In 1980, COMAR (Commission for Aid to Refugees) was created. During the two

decades after its creation, COMAR was dedicated exclusively to the Central American exodus, attending to mainly Guatemalans who were located in refugee camps first in Chiapas and later on in Campeche and Quintana Roo.

With the creation of Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) in 1993, formal channels to control and manage migration through the development of special programs were established. Since the mid-1990s to 2005, transit migration from the NTCA to the U.S. increased sharply, reaching its highest point in 2005 (around 400,000 migrants). From 2006 to 2009, there was a significant reduction in the flows (around 70%) and a sustained increase of violence against migrants and human rights violations afterwards (Pederzini, et al. 2015).

In 2011, the Mexican government adopted a new migration law that was intended to guarantee the rights of migrants disregarding their legal status or their intention to settle in Mexico or in the United States. The law facilitates migrant regularization and permanent residence grants for those with high skills. It has also created channels to provide access to public services and to specific rights, such as basic access to health care via Seguro Popular. It incorporates recognition of a large number of rights and guarantees in favor of migrants but is not designed to ensure the effective exercise of these rights. On the contrary, due to the fact that irregular entry and stay in the country are treated as crimes and not as administrative offences, it regulates freedom deprivation in terms and deadlines that exceed many international standards and even the Mexican Constitution, generating a state of exception and discrimination against migrants. The law does not provide any kind of control to arrest. Admission to detention centers constitutes the standard of treatment for persons identified in irregular migratory situations and not the exception. In general, it has been found in detention centers that the development of the migratory administrative procedure is aimed primarily at deportation or return (Consejo Ciudadano del Instituto Nacional de Migración 2017).

In the United States, legal flows from Latin America were restricted between mid-1960s and the mid-1970s by the U.S. immigration law that established a preference system heavily favoring family reunification. However, hiring of unauthorized migrants was explicitly allowed by this law until 1986, enabling the growth of unauthorized labour migration mainly from Mexico and later on from the NTCA countries. The *Immigration Reform and Control Act* (IRCA) legalized 136,000 Salvadorans and 50,000 Guatemalans (around one fifth of the population in 1990).

Although most NTCA nationals in the U.S. were fleeing from conflict and political persecution in the 1970s and 1980s, refuge and asylum options were severely limited. Less than 3% of applications from Guatemalans and Salvadorans were granted asylum throughout the 1980s. It was not until the 1990s, a decade after their arrival, that many obtained legal permanent residency via asylum (Pederzini, et al. 2015).

The creation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in 1990, a mechanism that provides provisional but renewable relief from deportation and also grants work authorization to people from countries affected by political strife or natural disasters, covered many Salvadorans but not Guatemalans.

## NTCA POPULATION IN MEXICO AND THE U.S.WW

In this section the population born in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras residing in U.S. or Mexico are analyzed and compared. Statistics were calculated from the Mexican (2000 and 2010) and U.S. Population Census (2000) and from the American Community Survey from 2008-2012 (Pederzini, et al. 2015). In order to get a picture of past and recent trends, recent (less than 5 years) and non-recent (more than 5 years in the country) migrants are analyzed separately.

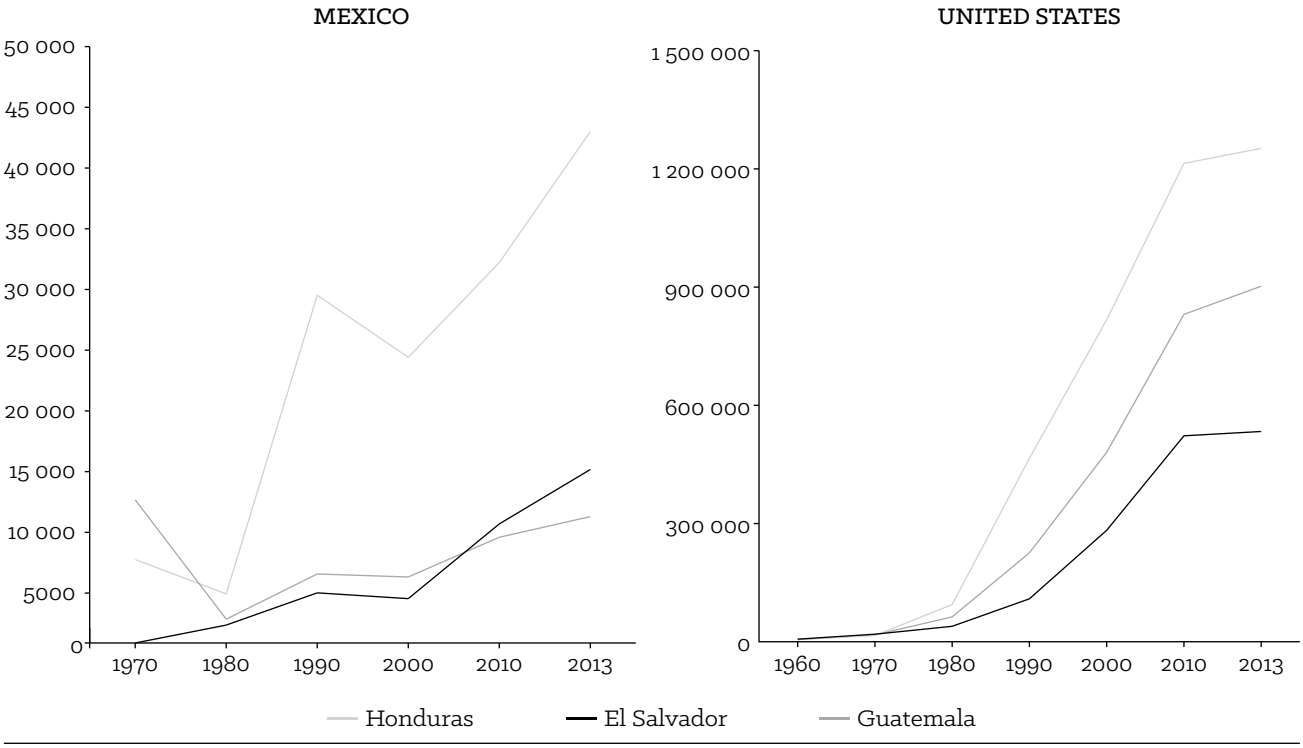
Between 2000 and 2010, NTCA population "normally residing" in Mexico increased by 50%, going from 33,000 to 50,000. More than two thirds (70%) of NTCA nationals in Mexico in 2000 were born in Guatemala, reflecting a migratory tradition and stronger relations linking the two countries (see Graph 1). Towards the end of the period however, the relative presence of Salvadorans and especially Hondurans increased, motivated by the economic, political and violent context described above (see Graph 1). Population from the NTCA in the U.S. is more than twenty times larger than in Mexico and Salvadorans show the highest relative presence throughout the analyzed period. From 2000 to 2011, the number of nationals from the NTCA in the U.S. increased almost 65%.

Feminization is greater in Mexico in the group of recent migrants. However non-recent migrants in 2010 show similar feminization patterns in both countries, but still greater feminization in Mexico for Guatemalans (see Table 1). Female immigration in Chiapas and historical bonds in terms of culture and work activities between the Soconusco region and Guatemala may explain the greater presence of women. Recent migrants tend to be younger and less educated (with the exception of Salvadorans) in Mexico. Selectivity is increasing in the United States, thus age and years of schooling tend to be higher there.

As expected, male migrants generally join the labour force in Mexico and the U.S. (Graph 2). In the case of female migrants, possibly because one of the main drivers to migrate to Mexico is not related to labour but the family, the probability of participating in the labour force is much lower in Mexico than in the U.S. The gender role system in Mexico most likely contributes in restraining female labour force participation.

Participation by sector of NTCA nationals in Mexico and the

GRAPH 1. NTCA POPULATION IN MEXICO AND U.S.




Source: Pederzini, Riosmena, Masferrer y Molina, 2015.

TABLE 1. SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NTCA-BORN POPULATION LIVING IN MEXICO AND THE U.S. BY COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE

| | | 2000 | | | 2010 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | El Salvador | Guatemala | Honduras | El Salvador | Guatemala | Honduras |
| Percentage Females | | | | | | | |
| Recent* | U.S. | 43,9 | 36,5 | 43,8 | 48,1 | 34,3 | 39,2 |
| | Mexico | 46,5 | 54,4 | 58,5 | 46,8 | 55,1 | 54,1 |
| Non Recent** | U.S. | 49,6 | 48,0 | 53,6 | 48,8 | 43,5 | 49,8 |
| | Mexico | 52,9 | 51,8 | 58,3 | 48,4 | 52,6 | 47,7 |
| Average Age | | | | | | | |
| Recent* | U.S. | 24,6 | 24,0 | 25,4 | 27,3 | 25,2 | 26,9 |
| | Mexico | 27,7 | 23,7 | 24,4 | 25,4 | 24,3 | 23,7 |
| Non Recent** | U.S. | 36,7 | 36,4 | 37,5 | 41,1 | 38,1 | 38,9 |
| | Mexico | 39,0 | 35,7 | 37,8 | 44,5 | 38,1 | 35,5 |
| Average Years of Schooling | | | | | | | |
| Recent* | U.S. | 7,7 | 7,4 | 8,7 | 9,1 | 7,7 | 8,8 |
| | Mexico | 10,9 | 5,1 | 10,2 | 10,6 | 5,5 | 8,3 |
| Non Recent** | U.S. | 8,6 | 8,8 | 9,8 | 9,6 | 9,3 | 10,1 |
| | Mexico | 9,5 | 3,4 | 9,5 | 10,2 | 6,9 | 8,4 |

* Less than five years in the destination country ** Five or more years in the destination country

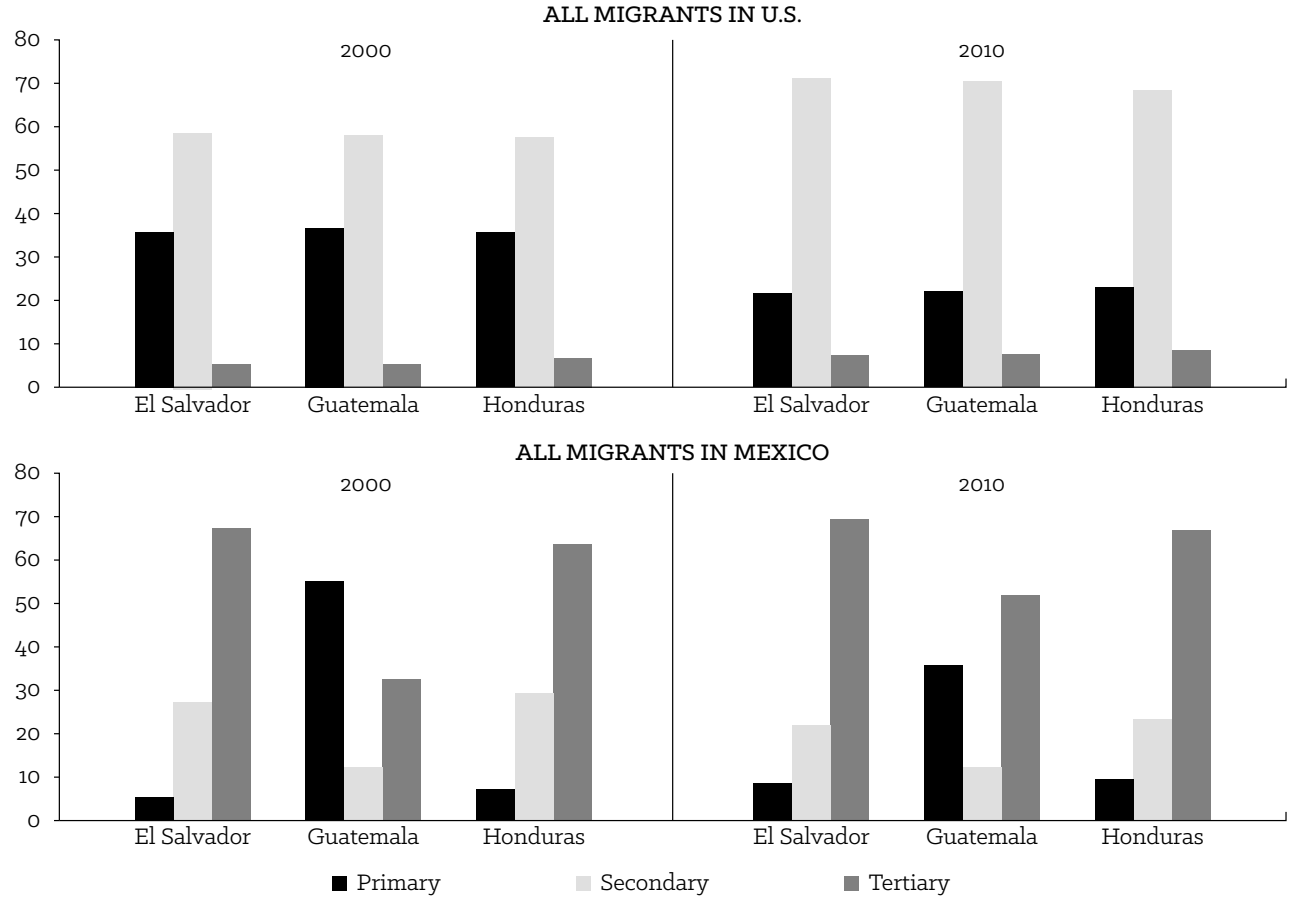
Source: Pederzini, Riosmena, Masferrer y Molina, 2015

GRAPH 2. LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF NTCA MIGRANTS IN MEXICO AND U.S.




Source: Source: Pederzini, Riosmena, Masferrer y Molina, 2015

GRAPH 3. LABOR PARTICIPATION BY ECONOMIC SECTOR OF NTCA MATIONALS IN MEXICO AND THE U.S.




Source: Pederzini, Riosmena, Masferrer y Molina, 2015

U.S. by sector shows a higher secondary sector participation of NTCA nationals in the U.S., while in Mexico the tertiary sector is predominant, even for Guatemalans who may have been expected to participate more in the primary sector. The construction sector in the U.S. may explain participation in the secondary sector. In Mexico, activities in the third sector mainly comprise trading activities, which encompasses a low level of formality (see Graph 3).

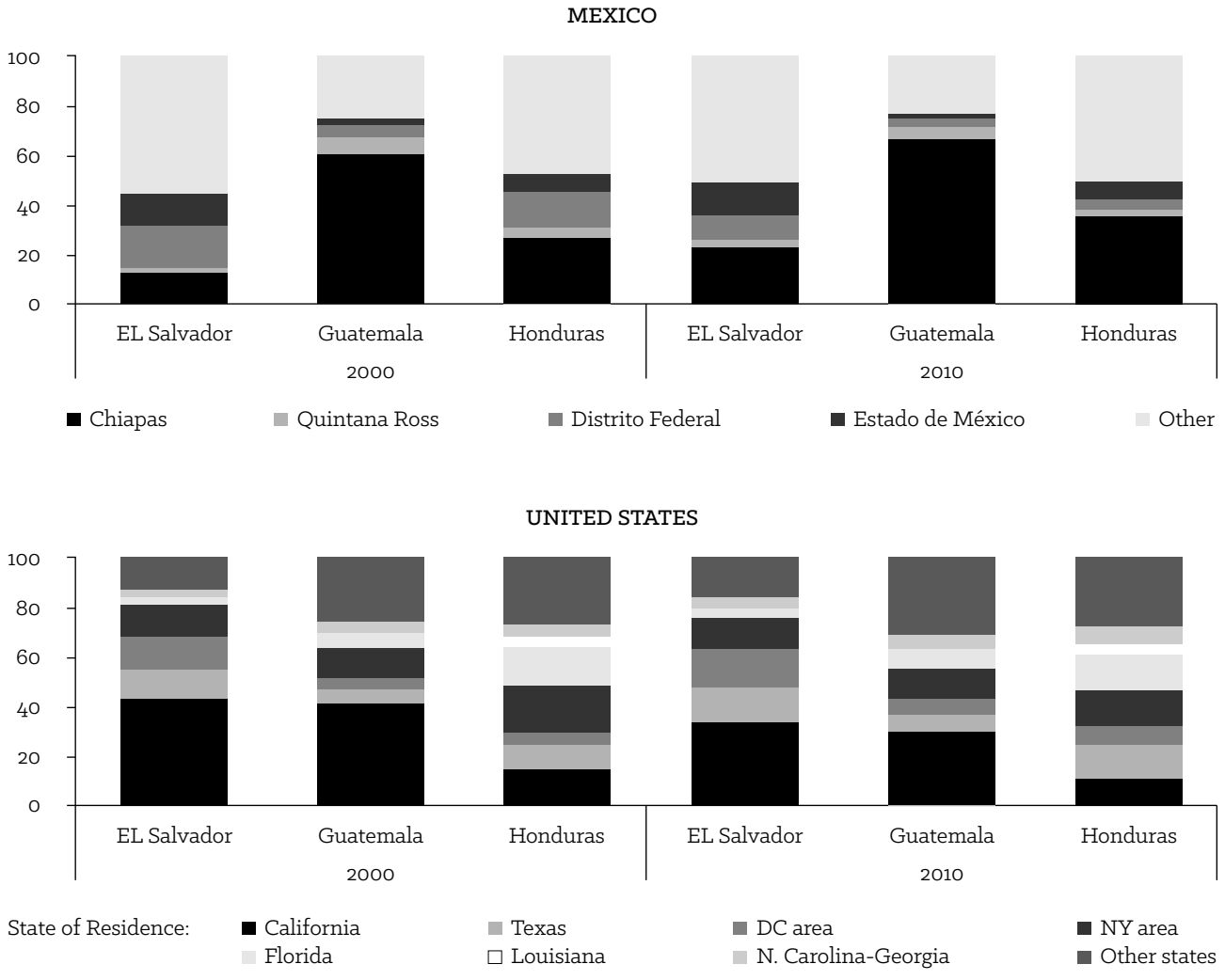
Regarding geographical distribution (see Graph 4), migrants of each nationality concentrate in certain states. However concentration is larger in Mexico and tends to increase, while the opposite happens in the United States. Guatemalans show the highest concentration levels in Mexico (60% in 2000 and 65% in 2010). The proportion of Salvadorans in the central urban areas of Mexico is greater than the other two nationalities, while Hondurans show the highest dispersion. However, Salvadorans and Hondurans show an increasing trend to concentrate in Chiapas, the closest state to the border with Guatemala.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Emigration from the NTCA to Mexico and the U.S., rooted in a historical and geo-political context defined by violence, insecurity and hard economic conditions, has persisted and even intensified in the past decade. In the past, civil wars and natural disasters were determinants for the Central American exodus. Nowadays, the population form the NTCA is fleeing gang and drug-related violence as the only way to survive.

The data presented here shows heterogenous demographic characteristics and work insertion of NTCA population in the U.S. and Mexico. Higher selectivity in the U.S. proves to be

GRAPH 4. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF NTCA MIGRANTS BY STATE IN MEXICO AND THE U. S.




Source: Pederzini, Riosmena, Masferrer y Molina, 2015

playing an important role in schooling levels and age profiles.

There are some clear challenges for integration of nationals from the NTCA in Mexico and the U.S. Immigration enforcement has favored the vicious cycle which links emigration, return and violence, creating more emigration. Attention has to be paid to the conditions where Guatemalans, Salvadorans and Hondurans return when deported.

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