# DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN NORTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA[1]

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**Studies on the interaction between migration and aging have focused mainly on immigrant receiving countries and not on sending nations. Future migration and demographic changes are studied here within the migration system of North America and the Northern Triangle of Central America. We compare main demographic indexes and age structure indicators with and without migration using information from the United Nations. Findings show that demographic components of natural increase are converging in the region. Migration slows down the aging process for the United States and Canada, has a small effect on Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, but speeds up aging in El Salvador. Changes in age structure for the main sending countries suggest international migration to the United States is unlikely to reach historical peaks observed in the past. The analysis provides a benchmark to foresee possible changes of migration and how they will interact with population aging, one of the key issues of our times.**

**Los estudios sobre la interacción entre migración y envejecimiento se han centrado, principalmente, en los países de recepción de inmigrantes, y no en las naciones expulsoras. En este artículo se estudian la migración futura y las transformaciones demográficas al interior del sistema migratorio de América del Norte y el Triángulo Norte de América Central. Comparamos los principales índices demográficos, así como los indicadores de estructura etaria, con y sin migración, utilizando información de las Naciones Unidas. Los hallazgos muestran que los componentes demográficos del incremento natural convergen en la región. La migración desacelera el proceso de envejecimiento para los Estados Unidos y Canadá, tiene un pequeño efecto sobre México, Guatemala y Honduras, pero**

1 A previous version of this work was presented at the Metropolis North America Policy Forum in Washington D.C. in 2017. This is a continuation of (Giorguli, Garcia-Guerrero, and Masferrer 2016) and part of a larger ongoing research project on international migration within North America.

acelera el envejecimiento en El Salvador. Los cambios en la estructura etaria para los principales países expulsores, sugieren que es improbable que la migración internacional a los Estados Unidos alcance los picos históricos observados en el pasado. El análisis ofrece un punto de referencia para predecir los posibles cambios en la migración, y cómo interactuarán con el envejecimiento poblacional, una de las problemáticas clave de nuestra época.

Les études sur l'interaction entre migration et vieillissement ont principalement porté sur les pays d'accueil des immigrants et non sur les pays d'origine. Les migrations futures et les changements démographiques sont étudiés ici dans le système de migration de l'Amérique du Nord et du Triangle du Nord de l'Amérique centrale. Nous comparons les principaux indices démographiques et les indicateurs de structure par âge avec et sans migration en utilisant les informations des Nations Unies. Les résultats montrent que les volets démographiques de l'accroissement naturel convergent dans la région. Les migrations ralentissent le processus de vieillissement aux États-Unis et au Canada, ont un léger effet sur le Mexique, le Guatemala et le Honduras, mais accélèrent le vieillissement au Salvador. Les modifications de la structure par âge des principaux pays d'origine suggèrent qu'il est peu probable que la migration internationale vers les États-Unis atteigne les sommets historiques observés dans le passé. L'analyse fournit une référence pour prévoir les changements possibles de la migration et la manière dont ils interagiront avec le vieillissement de la population, l'un des principaux problèmes de notre époque.

## INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND POPULATION AGING

International migration has a direct impact on population size, its distribution and its composition. How it impacts population aging has been studied mainly in Europe and traditional immigration countries like Canada and the United States (Bongaarts 2004, Canales 2015, Lesthaeghe, Page, and Surkyn 1991, Passel and Cohh 2017, Philipov and Schuster 2010, Plane 1993). Overall, studies suggest that, given usual inflow levels, immigration does not offset population aging, although it impacts population growth and changes the age structure in the short run (Beaujot 2002, 2003, Coleman 2002, 2008, Lutz and Scherbov 2002, Paterno 2011, United Nations 2000, Zaiceva and Zimmermann 2016). Scholars have highlighted similar population aging processes in Developing Countries (DCs), which have typically been immigrant-sending countries. For example, Renuga and colleagues (2017) find that many DCs will experience aging before they benefit from the demographic dividend. However, the impact of migration on population aging is understudied for traditionally immigrant-sending countries.

## NEW MIGRATION PATTERNS IN THE REGION

Migration dynamics between North America (NA) and the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA, formed by Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) have changed in recent years. With one out of five living in Canada born in a different country, Canada has one of the highest migration rates. As the result of labour demands and immigration policy, the United States has an undocumented population of 11 million, of which 5.8 million are Mexicans and 1.7 million are Central Americans (Passel and Cohn 2016). The United States and Canada are traditional receiving-countries with large shares of foreign-born populations, while Mexico and the NTCA have been traditional sending-countries.

The role of Mexico changed recently with a decline in emigration and an increase in return migration and foreign-born arrivals, following the 2008 Great Recession and the increase of immigration enforcement since the mid-2000s (Masferrer and Roberts 2016). Today, the US-born population migrating to Mexico is the largest North-to-South flow in the world (Giorguli, Garcia-Guerrero, and Masferrer 2016). Central American migration to the United States came into sharp focus in 2014 when more Central Americans were apprehended than Mexicans at the Mexico-U.S. border (Cohn, Passel, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2017), although emigration from the NTCA to North America has its historical roots in the political conflicts of the early 1980s (Pederzini et al. 2015).[2]

## STUDYING DEMOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS UNDER TWO DIFFERENT MIGRATION SCENARIOS

We use data from the United Nations (2017) that allow cross-country comparisons of demographic dynamics under two scenarios (with and without migration) to study

2 A more complete analysis of migration characteristics, trends and patterns, as well as immigration policies in the region over time can be found in Giorguli et al. (2016).

FIGURE 1: LIFE EXPECTANCY AND TOTAL FERTILITY RATES FOR PERIODS 1950-2015 (SOLID) AND 2016-2050 (DOTTED)




Source: UN, World Population Prospects, 2017 revision

the effects of migration on future demographic patterns. Specifically, we analyze the evolution of life expectancy at birth (LE), total fertility rate (TFR), ageing index (AI), dependency ratio (DR), and selected population age groups.[3] Medium- and zero-migration variants are compared to analyze the effect of migration on age structure. Both scenarios assume medium fertility and mortality. The medium-variant assumes recent levels of net-migration will be constant until the period of 2045-2050 (United Nations 2015).

## MAIN FINDING: DEMOGRAPHIC CONVERGENCE

Results show a generalized aging process in the region. Convergence to higher levels of life expectancy (LE) is expected by 2050 despite different starting points in 1950 (Figure 1), and even if unexpected events might delay this process (Canudas-Romo, García-Guerrero, and Echarri-Cánovas 2015, Xu et al. 2016). Canada and the United States crossed the fertility replacement level threshold in 1972, El Salvador did it by 2016, and Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala are expected to reach it by 2018, 2029, and 2045, respectively.

To analyze changes in age structure that result from the demographic transition of the countries in the region, Masferrer and colleagues (2018) show how migration impacts age-groups 0 to 15 and 15 to30 years. These age groups in Mexico and the NTCA will decrease marginally due to migration, although the effect will be more visible for El Salvador. Migration in Canada and the United States sharply increases for these age groups. It is expected that the number of young labour market entrants (aged 15-to 30) will increase in the United States by 2.2 million from 2016 to 2020 and more than 11 million by 2050 due to migration.

Future fertility trends (Figure 1) suggest that the increase in dependency ratios (DRs) for Canada and United States, and Mexico post-2035 is not driven by increases in the young population (Figure 2). In Canada and the United States, migration would slow down the increase of DRs at a stage of old-age driven dependency, whereas Mexico and the NTCA will have DRs dominated by the young-age population. In other words, Canada is going through the aging process at a

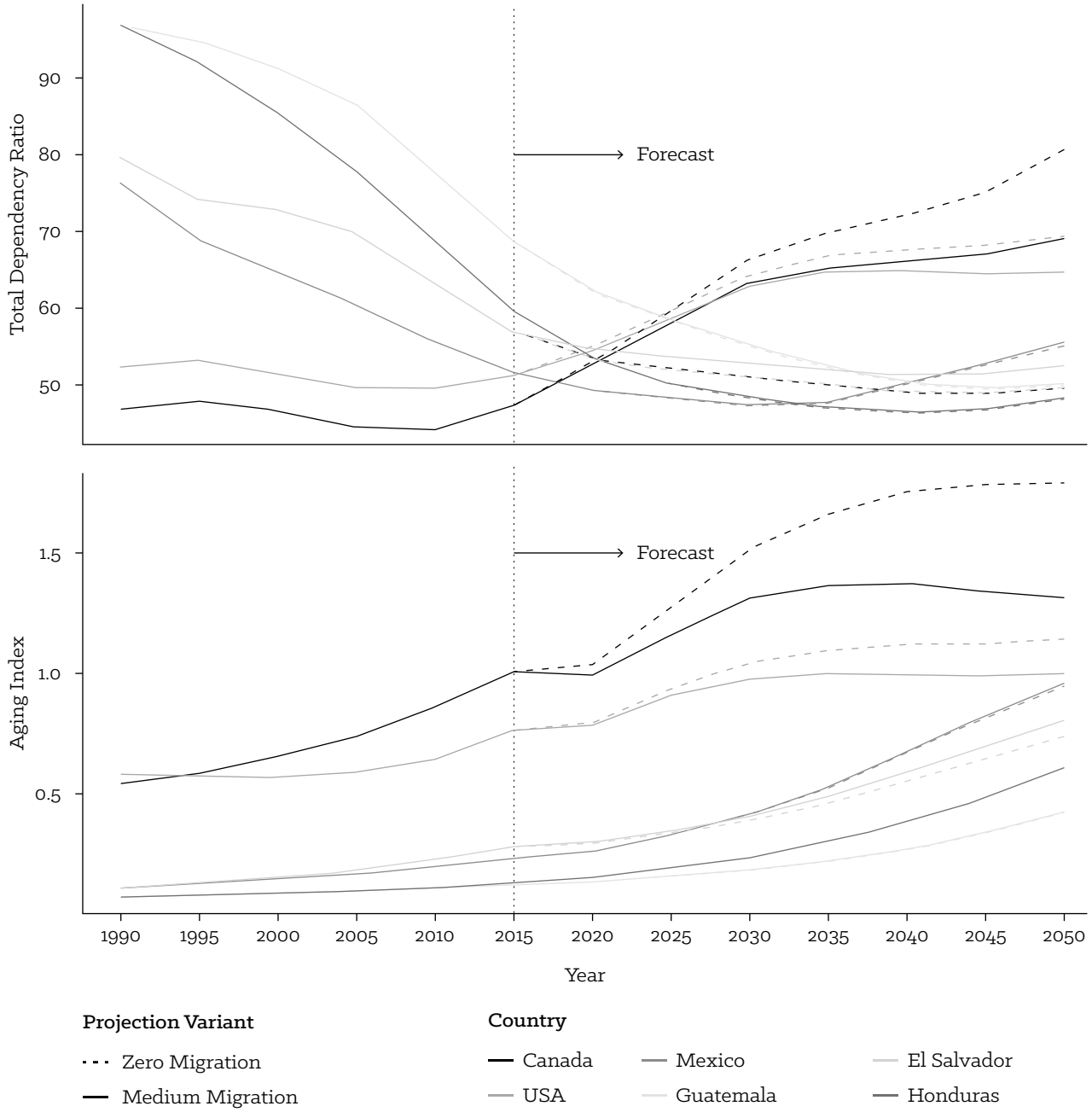
3 LE is defined as the number of years that a newborn expects to live if the mortality conditions of her or his year of birth remains along her or his life; TFR is the average number of children that a woman will have if fertility conditions for a certain calendar year remains along the rest of her reproductive life; AI is the ratio of the number of persons over 60 years old per hundred persons under 15 years old, and DR is the number of dependent persons per hundred persons in labour ages.

faster rate without migration, followed by the United States. The NTCA countries are aging; with migration having an earlier and more visible effect in El Salvador. Although the DRs for Mexico and the United States in 2015 are similar, an older-population drives DRs for the United States, while in Mexico a younger one drives them. Regardless of migration, the evolution of the total DR for Guatemala shows that dependency is driven by an increase of the young-age group.

## DISCUSSION

Demographic dynamics suggest convergence in fertility below replacement, and an overall aging process in the NA-NTCA region. Future migration may slow down the aging process in Canada and United States, have a small effect in Mexico, and speed it up in El Salvador. Considering the size of the populations and the decrease of young age-groups for the main

FIGURE 2: DEPENDENCY RATIOS AND AGEING INDEXES FOR NA AND NTCA, 1950-2050




Source: Own calculations based on Un World Population Prospects, 2017 revision

sending countries, it is unlikely that international migration to the United States from Mexico and the NTCA will reach the historical peak observed at the beginning of 2000s.

This is coherent with research suggesting that the era of rapid increase of immigration levels from Mexico and the NTCA is ending in the United States, contrary to what is expected in Europe (Hanson and McIntosh 2016). Of course, the NA-NTCA migration system is not closed, as the United States and Canada receive immigrants from diverse origins. In Canada, Asian migration is much larger than Mexican migration, for example. Still, the United States remains the main destination for Mexico and NTCA with immigrants from these countries overwhelmingly represented in jobs that are predominantly in low skilled occupations (Brick, Challinor, and Rosenblum 2011).

Medium-variant migration assumes that future trends of net migration will remain similar to recent ones. For Mexico, the close-to-zero net-migration rate observed since 2009 (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012) might be driving the small projected differences due to migration. These projections do not take into account changes in the age composition of migrants associated with changes in age at first migration or return migration. Nevertheless, this kind of analysis provides a benchmark to foresee possible changes of migration and how they will interact with population aging, one of the key issues of our time.

This must be kept in mind during the policy-making process. As the aging process advances in Canada and the United States, as well as in other countries in the region, the demand for migrant labour will continue and may even rise for particular occupations, such as care work. The decrease in demographic pressure from mainly sending countries may represent an opportunity to manage migration, recognizing regional dynamics and linkages. For many years now, Canada has explicitly acknowledged the demographic *need* for migration in its policy and target immigration levels. Our results show that other countries, especially the United States, would benefit from similar measures.

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