How Local Community Context Shapes Labor Market Re-Entry and Resource Mobilization among Return Migrants: An Examination of Rural and Urban Communities in Mexico

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Abstract:

Recent estimates suggest that nearly half of all international migrants return to their communities of origin within five years of emigration. Motivated by high levels of return migration, scholars are increasingly investigating the ways in which return migrants mobilize resources they acquire abroad, such as human and financial capital, to achieve economic mobility upon return. Yet, resource mobilization and labor market reintegration unfold in heterogeneous community contexts. To understand the labor market reintegration of return migrants in various local contexts, we draw on an eight-year study that included interviews with 153 Mexican returnees to examine how labor market reintegration and resource mobilization vary across three types of communities: urban, urban-adjacent, and rural. U.S.-Mexico migration is the largest binational return flow in the world, providing a unique opportunity to explore variations in the reintegration experiences of returnees. We find that labor market reintegration and resource mobilization are contextually embedded processes that respond to the social, economic, and spatial features of migrants' origin communities. Following our analysis, we extend three testable hypotheses that can guide future research on international migration and return.

Keywords: Return migration: Resource mobilization; Economic mobility; Ethnography; Mexico

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Introduction

The increase in global mobility since World War II has produced a vast scholarship on international migration, the large majority of which focuses on emigration and immigrant integration into receiving societies (de Haas, Castles, and Miller 2019; Portes and Rumbaut 2014). Yet, international migration is not a one-way flow. Estimates suggest that about two in five international migrants return to their communities of origin within five years of emigration (Battistella 2018). Between 1990-2015, roughly one quarter of international mobility was composed of migrants returning to their countries of birth (Azose and Raftery 2019).

Motivated by high levels of return migration, scholars are increasingly investigating the labor market reintegration of migrants into their origin countries (Battistella 2018). By and large, these studies examine how return migrants mobilize resources they acquire abroad, such as human and financial capital, to achieve economic mobility upon return (Hagan and Wassink 2020). Yet, resource mobilization and labor market reintegration unfold in heterogeneous community contexts. As we argue in this paper, migrants' acquisition and mobilization of human and financial capital is shaped not just by their migration experiences, but also by the characteristics of the communities to which they return.

We draw on eight years of fieldwork and 153 in-depth interviews conducted throughout the historic migrant-sending state of Guanajuato, Mexico, to examine how return migrants' experiences of resource mobilization and labor market mobility vary across different community contexts. We investigate and contrast migration trajectories, resource mobilization strategies, and pathways to economic mobility among return migrants in three types of communities that vary by social, economic, and spatial context: urban, urban-adjacent, and rural. Our detailed analysis reveals contextually dependent patterns of resource mobilization and economic mobility upon

return, which inform a set of testable hypotheses that we outline in the conclusion. Although our hypotheses have implications for the impact of deportation on labor market reintegration, we do not treat deportation as a central analytical variable owing to space constraints and sample size limitations.[1] We hope that these hypotheses can guide future research on both forced and voluntary return migration to Mexico and elsewhere.

Mexico-U.S. migration: a system in flux

In Mexico, as in other low-to-middle-income countries (LMICs) around the world, one of the most prevalent responses to economic constraints is migration, particularly among less-educated workers and those in rural areas with limited local opportunities (Massey et al. 1999; Stark 1991). Targeted recruitment by U.S. growers, which accelerated in the 1940s aided by a federal guest worker program, initiated a large-scale pattern of circular migration as Mexicans from primarily rural and agrarian communities traveled back and forth to work seasonally in U.S. agriculture (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Over the next half century, U.S.-migration became embedded in Mexican society as a strategy to overcome inefficiencies in local labor markets and recoup the opportunities that were lost during the country's economic restructuring of the 1980s and 1990s (Hernández-León 2008). Throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century, Mexico-U.S. migration constituted the world's largest binational emigrant flow (Abel and Sander 2014).

While circular migration long characterized the U.S.-Mexico system, restrictive and punitive enforcement by the U.S. Government and the Great Recession of 2007-2009 escalated

[1] For recent examinations of labor market reintegration among deported migrants, see Hagan et al. (2019) on Mexico and David (2017) on the Maghreb region in Africa.

voluntary and forced return migration to Mexico (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015). Between 2005 and 2014, 2.4 million Mexicans returned home from the United States, resulting in a 10 percent decline in the Mexican-born population in the United States (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015). Azose and Raftery (2019) estimate that U.S.-Mexico return migration is not only the largest binational return flow in the world today but that it is almost four times higher than the second largest return flow from the United Arab Emirate back to India. Due to improving economic opportunities in some Mexican states, heightened border and interior immigration enforcement in the United States in recent years, and the risk of apprehension and deportation these returnees are increasingly opting to settle permanently in Mexico rather than re-migrate to the United States (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015; Hagan, Hernández-León, and Demonsant 2015; Martínez, Slack, and Martinez-Schuldt 2018). The shift away from circular Mexico-U.S. migration toward more permanent return provides a unique opportunity to explore contextual patterns of labor market reintegration in Mexico, particularly as recent returnees are settling in an increasingly diverse set of rural and urban areas (Masferrer and Roberts 2012).

Theorizing return migration and economic mobility in community context

Studies attempting to understand return migration and economic mobility in Mexico and elsewhere primarily rely on the two dominant theoretical perspectives developed to explain international labor migration: the neoclassical economic model and the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM). The neoclassical model views international migration as a response to wage differentials between sending and receiving communities (Harris and Todaro 1970). From the neoclassical perspective, migrants only return home if they fail to achieve desired wages abroad and migration experience is not expected to affect economic mobility upon return.

Yet, subsequent studies revealed that accumulation of financial capital while abroad predicts higher odds of certain labor market outcomes including self-employment upon return (Massey and Parrado 1998). As a result, scholars proposed the NELM, which contends that individuals migrate to overcome specific challenges in their origin labor markets (Stark 1991). In particular, the NELM suggests that workers who aspire to start businesses but lack access to capital due to inefficient credit markets migrate abroad to accumulate these start-up funds. Building on this framework, numerous studies document a positive association between international migration experience and entry into entrepreneurship among return migrants (Hagan and Wassink 2016; Hamdouch and Wahba 2015; Sheehan and Riosmena 2013). Marchetta (2012) further finds that international migration experience is associated with more prosperous and long-lasting business formation among returnees (David 2017). Consistent with the NELM's predictions, Massey and Parrado (1998) document a positive association between savings accumulated abroad and business formation at home.

More recent research diverges from the NELM's emphasis on economic strategies and financial savings to assess how skill formation among international migrants affects their economic opportunities upon return. These studies aim to measure migrants' "life-long" or "total human capital," which includes both formal schooling and informal learning in social and vocational contexts (Hagan et al. 2015; Williams 2007), to document the ways in which non-financial human capital skills that migrants acquire abroad affect their mobility upon return. Hagan and colleagues (2015), for example, found that Mexican migrants commonly accumulate technical, social, and English language skills while working in the United States. Consistent with the expected value of these new skills, a number of studies find that cumulative time spent abroad is associated with higher wages and upward occupational mobility upon return

(Lindstrom 2013; Reinhold and Thom 2013). Although these studies treat total migration experience as a proxy for human capital formation, studies that directly measure skill learning and transfer find that they positively predict occupational mobility and entrepreneurship upon return (Hagan and Wassink 2016; Williams and Baláž 2005). Consistent with the NELM, scholarship on migration and human capital formation suggests that migrants' mobility upon return results from their accumulation of new resources while working abroad. Yet, as Wassink and Hagan (2018) argue, unexpected human capital formation can direct return migrants to new and often unexpected mobility pathways, demonstrating that return migrants' economic mobility is not always the result of well-planned goals established prior to migration.

However, missing from the literature on return migration and labor market re-entry is a consideration of the ways in which the local context in the communities to which migrants return shapes labor market reintegration and resource mobilization. Local context is central to labor market opportunities in Mexico and other low and middle-income countries (Gindling and Newhouse 2014; Wassink 2018). Disparities in community size, level of development, and transportation infrastructure affect both local employment opportunities and opportunities for entrepreneurship (Durand, Parrado, and Massey 1996; Wassink 2018). As Figure 1 illustrates, these labor market disparities are particularly pronounced between less developed rural areas and more developed urban areas. In communities with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, which still include one quarter of Mexico's population (Díaz and Li Ng 2016), half of all workers are in agriculture and half of non-agricultural workers are self-employed without employees, a marginal status that often masks unemployment (Gindling and Newhouse 2014). By contrast, as Figure 1 shows, in the largest urban areas agricultural employment is close to zero, formal employment approaches almost 50 percent, and the prevalence of salaried consumers creates

opportunities for a growing proportion of workers to open non-agricultural businesses and hire workers. Disparate economic opportunities across Mexican communities likely affect resource accumulation and resource mobilization strategies among return migrants.

Missing from Figure 1 is the importance of spatial context for rural economic opportunities. Owing to regional urbanization (Portes and Roberts 2005), a growing proportion of rural Mexican communities share employment opportunities and transportation infrastructure with proximate cities. These communities differ from their more isolated counterparts in two important ways. First, proximity to urban areas expands employment opportunities through large firms located in industrial centers and export zones around cities. Second, although rural communities may remain internally underdeveloped, proximity to urban centers creates shared infrastructure, including access to transportation networks, which are essential for small manufacturing businesses that rely on the easy shipment of goods to factories and distribution centers (Durand et al. 1996).

The NELM recognizes the centrality of local context to the initiation and evolution of migration (Hamilton and Villarreal 2011). Scholars observe systematic variations in migration behavior as a result of differences in labor market opportunities in sending communities (Lindstrom 1996) and their proximity to urban areas (Hamilton and Villarreal 2011). These differences correspond to migrants' long-term labor market strategies. In rural and agrarian communities, most migrants engage in regular short-term trips, indicative of long-term economic dependence on migration (Garip 2016). By contrast, migrants from urban areas often undertake one or two extended trips, likely reflecting resource accumulation strategies to facilitate self-employment or occupational mobility upon return to more economically dynamic contexts with opportunities for investment and mobility (Hamilton and Villarreal 2011; Lindstrom 1996). In

this paper, we extend the importance of local context to the return migration experience. To recognize the importance of spatial context, we move beyond the rural/urban binary by identifying and contrasting pathways to economic mobility among Mexican return migrants across three types of communities that vary by social, economic, and spatial context: urban, urban-adjacent, and rural.

Site selection and research design

This analysis is based on a longitudinal and multi-site data collection process that developed over eight years. Drawing on the grounded approach to theory building, each round of fieldwork raised new questions that suggested the need for additional research (Charmaz 2014). The ongoing project is based in Guanajuato, a historic migrant-sending state with 5.5 million inhabitants, situated in west-central Mexico. Guanajuato is home to many rural communities with long histories of U.S.-migration. It also houses a number of large, industrial urban areas with northbound migrant streams that emerged during Mexico's economic restructuring in the 1990s (Hagan et al. 2015). This diversity of flows provides an opportunity to explore contextual variations in returnees' labor market reintegration and economic mobility.

We conducted three rounds of data collection that varied by theoretical interest, methodology, and location. The first wave in 2010 was intended to capture human capital transfers across the migratory circuit and their implications for labor market mobility in the United States and upon return to Mexico. Recognizing the greater opportunities to learn and apply new skills in urban areas relative to rural communities (Hernández-León 2008), we collected the initial data in León, an industrial city with 1.6 million inhabitants, in the heart of Guanajuato. Reflecting dynamics common throughout Mexican cities (see Figure 1), less than 1

percent of Leon's labor force is in agriculture, while one third work in manufacturing, 25 percent in commerce, and 37 percent in a fast-growing retail and service sector, fueled by domestic tourism and international commerce. Leon's diverse industrial base and rapid economic growth provide ample opportunities for returnees to invest their financial and human capital in new businesses. We used the Mexican Census to identify neighborhoods with high concentrations of return migrants, from which we interviewed 200 return migrants in 2010. These interviews included a combination of close- and open-ended questions, which captured migration histories, job histories, and the accumulation of human and financial capital.

Seeking to understand return migrants' long-term reintegration, we returned to Leon in 2015 and conducted follow-up interviews with respondents whom we were able to locate from the original sample. The follow-up interviews included questions about the labor market and migration histories of the return migrants between 2010 and 2015, which provided a longitudinal lens into labor market reintegration processes in a dynamic urban setting. However, our follow-up study was not without logistical challenges. Owing to population growth and reconfiguration in Leon, we could not relocate one-quarter of our respondents' addresses. From neighbors, we learned that others had moved, passed away, and in a few cases re-migrated. Ultimately, we re-interviewed about half of the original sample. This study uses the longitudinal Leon sample (N=93). On average, those we did not relocate were slightly younger and more educated than those we re-interviewed, likely capturing the greater flexibility of youth (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2015). But, importantly, their work and migration profiles were very similar. Appendix A examines the effects of attrition on our analytic sample in more detail.

Recognizing that return migrants' labor market reintegration could vary by local context, we returned to Guanajuato in 2017 and conducted 60 interviews in nine small-to-midsize

communities. We identified more rural municipalities with large return migrant populations using the Mexican Census. From these, we selected specific localities that varied by local development and spatial context with guidance from contacts at the University of Guanajuato. Our rural interviews incorporated elements from both stages of our Leon fieldwork to ensure data comparability across our field sites.[2]

Rural communities in Guanajuato generally possess limited internal economies, which are dominated by small-scale manufacturing and agriculture. Thus, Guanajuato is characterized by significant rural/urban disparities in socioeconomic mobility (Bouillon, Legovini, and Lustig 2003). However, a rapidly growing automotive sector has expanded employment opportunities in certain parts of the state. Mexican auto manufacturing ranks seventh globally, in total production. Guanajuato, one of five industrial clusters, houses 297 companies, including major General Motors, Volkswagen, and Mazda assembly plants (Franco and Moran 2016). Most of these factories send busses through rural communities to ferry workers in and out each day. Thus, like the export processing zones along Mexico's northern border, these factories provide employment opportunities for rural residents in nearby communities or along major transportation routes.

Table 1 profiles our 10 study communities using locality data from Mexico's National Population Council's 2010 Index of Marginalization.[3] In terms of education, housing quality, and possession of appliances, the rural communities tended to be considerably less developed than their urban counterparts. However, there were also large variations among the rural areas, with some having comparable levels of education and development to Leon. Because economic

[2] Logistical and budgetary constraints precluded us from collecting parallel longitudinal data in these rural communities.

[3] We use pseudonyms for all localities and respondents. Localities, which are nested within municipalities, are the smallest units of geographical aggregation in the Mexican Census.

opportunities and international migration are affected by proximity to urban areas (Hamilton and Villarreal 2011), we grouped the rural communities into two categories that capture spatial variation: urban-adjacent and rural. All the urban-adjacent communities were accessible by major paved roads and most were adjacent to urban areas. In contrast, the two rural communities were 39 and 61 minutes respectively from the nearest city centers and were inaccessible via public transportation.[4] To access the isolated communities, we traveled heavily rutted dirt roads which regularly become impassible during the rainy season.

Our semi-structured interviews, which we recorded, contained a mix of close- and open-ended questions and lasted from 30 minutes to three hours. We transcribed the interviews to identify themes and transferred responses to Stata15 to create a profile of our respondents. To analyze return migrants' labor market experiences, we constructed *biographical narratives* for each respondent. These narratives integrate work histories, family and social contexts, financial capital accumulation, and human capital formation across the migratory circuit. We constructed these narratives independently of our contextual framework and then organized them by community type. This inductive strategy revealed expected but also surprising ways in which international migration, labor market reintegration, and resource mobilization vary across diverse community contexts.

Sample profile

Table 2 profiles our respondents by community type. At our last interview, most of our respondents were in their forties and married with children. The predominance of men in the sample reflects the gendered nature of U.S.-Mexico return migration; women are more likely

[4] We used Google Maps to estimate drive times.

than men to settle permanently in the United States and men account for 9/10 migrants deported to Mexico (Roberts, Menjívar, and Rodríguez 2017). We observed significantly lower educational attainment among our rural respondents, likely reflecting pressure on youth to contribute to the household economy in poor, agrarian contexts (Bouillon et al. 2003). Almost all our respondents worked prior to migration.

Although most of our respondents first migrated to the United States in their late teens and early twenties, their migration trajectories differed by community context. About half of the urban respondents only migrated once and the others on average migrated only two or three times. Almost all our urban respondents entered the United States without authorization. These patterns highlight an nascent urban flow from Mexico to the United States, which emerged during the 1990s in the midst of Mexico's "great migration" (Hernández-León 2008). By contrast, 83 percent of those in urban-adjacent communities, and all but one of our rural respondents, migrated multiple times, and most engaged in circular migration over many years. A much higher proportion of the rural migrants, especially in the two isolated communities, traveled to the United States with H2 guest-worker visas. These striking variations highlight important differences between established rural migration flows and emerging urban streams (Hamilton and Villarreal 2011; Hernández-León 2008). They also point to the more limited labor market opportunities in rural areas, which encourage returnees to re-migrate rather than investing in their sending communities (Lindstrom 1996).

Reasons for migration also varied by community type. Although economic factors and a desire for opportunity were the most commonly cited factors, one third of the urban respondents

migrated to learn or in pursuit of self-improvement.[5] Interestingly, although many of our respondents invested remitted financial capital in business formation, very few attributed their initial departures to planned investments, even with the benefit of hindsight. These motivations reflect recent evidence, which suggests that plans commonly evolve across the migratory circuit as individuals form families, accumulate new resources, and reassess their options (Wassink and Hagan 2018).

Table 2 also highlights variations in reasons for returning home across the three community types. Consistent with recent evidence (Konzett-Smoliner 2016; Van Hook and Zhang 2011), family unity was the most commonly cited reason for returning home among both urban and urban-adjacent respondents. Among the rural respondents, most of whom migrated as temporary guest workers, visa expiration was the most common factor reported. Fifteen percent of our respondents in urban and urban-adjacent areas were deported with formal orders from the United States and several others attributed their returns to fear of deportation or discrimination. Despite evidence that the decline in Mexico-U.S. migration and increase in return migration was driven in large part by the Great Recession (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015), only a handful of our respondents attributed their returns to job loss. As our respondents' narratives reveal, decisions to return are embedded in evolving social contexts, in which individuals regularly evaluate their family attachments as well as their relative economic opportunities at home and abroad. This pattern, which is consistent with other recent studies (Hagan et al. 2015; Sandoval 2013; Van Hook and Zhang 2011), highlights the importance of non-economic factors such as family ties and health in migration decisions among foreign-born persons living in the United States.

[5] These motivations could reflect attempts to recoup opportunities lost during Mexico's economic restructuring in the 1990s (Hernández-León 2008).

Results

We now identify and describe patterns of resource mobilization and economic mobility among returnees in each of the community types: urban, urban-adjacent, and rural. Each section engages with Table 3, which summarizes respondents' labor market statuses, industrial profiles, and resource mobilization strategies by community type.

Mobility opportunities in a dynamic urban context

Table 3 highlights a diverse array of labor market pathways among our urban respondents. Except for two returnees who lived in a rural hamlet on the city's edge, all the urban returnees entered the non-agricultural workforce. Many of the urban return migrants found jobs as entry-level workers and heavy-machinery operators in the city's dominant shoe and leather manufacturing industry. Others found entry-level and supervisory jobs in the area's automotive factories and adjacent industrial park, which produces automotive parts. Others opened small businesses in manufacturing, construction, commerce, and services, where they produced goods either to vend in the city's open-air flea markets or to sell to wealthy residents in *privadas* (gated communities). Others worked in retail, catering largely to tourists and business travelers.

As the bottom panel of Table 3 highlights, skill mobilization was a central component of labor market mobility in Leon. More than half of the urban respondents invested human capital—social, technical, or English language skills—gained in the United States in their work upon return. Yet, in contrast to the NELM, which views international migration as a strategy to accumulate financial investment capital, only 21 percent of our urban respondents invested U.S.-

savings into their work in Leon. We found that urban areas like Leon, with dynamic industrial bases and large diverse populations, encourage the investment of new skills in creative entrepreneurship outside traditional industry niches.

The most common mobility pathway that emerged from skill transfers was entrepreneurship. Almost 20 percent of the urban returnees launched businesses with employees. Three opened auto shops, using U.S. machinery and techniques to improve the quality of their work. For example, one of these returnees explained that he began ordering replacement parts rather than repairing broken components, a technique that he learned in the United States. Others drew on their U.S. work experience to open restaurants that sold American and Tex-Mex style food or opened stores that carried U.S. brands and styles. In these instances, new skills enabled return migrants to distinguish themselves from other local businesses or to branch out and establish new niches in the Leon economy.

Take the case of Jose, a self-employed carpenter who migrated to the United States in 2000 in order to improve his family's economic situation and expand his business. In the U.S. labor market, Jose worked as a carpenter. In this job, he reskilled, learning to work with new technology. When Jose returned to settle with his family in Leon in 2009, with new tools, techniques, and design ideas, he carved a niche in the local economy producing U.S. style cabinetry, which separated him from local competitors. Jose initially struggled to market his high-quality services to other residents in his working-class neighborhood. But, as he explained, "over time I made contacts in *privada*s [up-scale gated neighborhoods] with wealthy residents." With access to this moneyed clientele, Jose could maximize the returns to his advanced carpentry skills. When we re-interviewed Jose in 2015, he had expanded his carpentry business and hired three employees.

Others, like Pablo, drew on English-language skills learned in the United States to launch service-sector ventures catering to foreign businesspersons traveling to Leon to purchase or market shoe and leather products. Pablo migrated to the United States as a teenager, leaving behind his unfinished secondary education and long days working in his family's in-home shoe factory. Pablo attended a U.S. high school, where he became fluent in English. After working as a waiter and then an assistant manager in a Mexican restaurant in the United States, Pablo returned to Leon for family reasons. Upon surveying Leon's labor market, he decided to purchase a taxi. Pablo amassed a large and diverse customer base and can charge international travelers more than the going rate because of his English language skills.

Jose and Pablo provide just two of the many and varied examples of entrepreneurship that we encountered among return migrants in Leon. Among our urban respondents, we found that two primary factors limited the returns to remitted skills outside of self-employment. First, it is easier to apply new technologies to entrepreneurship than to alter existing work processes under the supervision of an employer or manger. Second, and more importantly, the unregulated structure of informal sector wage work disincentivizes employers from rewarding their workers' skills in industries such as construction and small-scale manufacturing (Perry et al. 2007). Hence, skills often go unrewarded in informal sector businesses and workers without the necessary schooling to secure professional jobs express a strong preference for self-employment (Gindling and Newhouse 2014). With that said, social and English-language skills proved easier than technical ones to mobilize in wage work. We found that these competences create opportunities for urban returnees to secure front-room jobs in restaurants, stores, and hotels, especially those that cater to English-speaking travelers.

Interestingly, financial remittances mostly played a supporting role in our urban respondents' business formation. Although accumulated savings often enable the initiation of new ventures (Massey and Parrado 1998; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006), skills learned abroad, more than financial capital, allowed our urban entrepreneurs, like Jose and Pablo, to distinguish themselves in competitive urban markets. Joanna, a woman we interviewed explained that she became familiar with U.S. interior design while abroad. Since returning, she stays abreast of the latest styles, with which she advises her husbands construction business to provide him with an edge against local competitors. For return migrants without new skills to distinguish their enterprises, labor market saturation combined with a broad array of opportunities for wage work discouraged self-employment except as a last resort against unemployment.

Constrained mobility in urban-adjacent communities

Like their urban counterparts, our respondents in urban-adjacent communities held a variety of labor market statuses. But, as Table 3 shows, these migrants were more likely than their urban counterparts to operate small businesses or work in low-wage jobs in services, construction, and manufacturing. Within the service sector, we found several urban-adjacent migrants who operated small in-home convenience stores *(abarrotes*), which provide fresh produce, non-perishable goods, and other sundries to residents in their local communities. Outside of retail, there were very few service-oriented enterprises, reflecting small and impoverished populations unable to sustain taxi drivers, auto mechanics, and other service providers, like those we encountered in Leon. In poor Mexican communities, residents rely primarily on public transportation, construct their homes, and repair their cars because they cannot afford to pay for these services (González de la Rocha 1994).

In contrast to Leon, these more limited and impoverished environments privileged financial remittances, while limiting returns to accumulated human capital. As Table 3 shows, almost three quarters of our urban-adjacent respondents used financial remittances for investment upon return, compared to just 21 percent of our urban respondents. Financial savings and transfers were central to business formation in urban-adjacent communities. Out of the 17 respondents who started small businesses upon return, 13 relied on savings from their U.S. jobs. For less educated workers in these constrained economic settings, business formation is often the only pathway out of low-wage informal sector jobs (Perry et al. 2007). Yet, inefficient credit markets limit access to start-up capital among would-be entrepreneurs. Our urban-adjacent findings are consistent with other studies, suggesting that migration can provide a key financial boost for informal sector workers looking to launch their own microenterprises (Massey and Parrado 1998; Mesnard and Ravallion 2006).

Tomas, a migrant from Ojo de Agua, illustrates how U.S. savings can enable urban-adjacent residents to transition from informal sector wage work to business ownership, often in the same industry in which they labored prior to migration. Brickmaking is the dominant manufacturing industry in Ojo de Agua. About two dozen large ovens abut the small community, where residents mold and bake thousands of bricks every day. Self-employed brickmaking is not a lucrative career, but oven owners keep more of their profits than they dole out to *ayudantes*. Thus, the construction of an oven leads to modest growth in long-term earnings. After 19 years working in his uncle's business, Tomas migrated to the United States. After seven years abroad, he felt the tug to rejoin his wife and three school-aged children in Mexico in 2016. Motivated by the economic responsibility to provide for his family and the limited employment prospects for someone with just three years of schooling, Tomas set aside about $500 over his last few months

in the United States. Upon return, he used his U.S. savings to build his own oven. Although his earnings in Mexico do not approach his U.S. wages, as a self-employed brickmaker, Tomas brings home more than he did as his uncle's *ayudante* and he lives with his family from whom he was separated while abroad. As Tomas explained to us, "I prefer to be my own boss. I earn more money and my time is my own."

Other migrants, like Ruben, invested their foreign earnings in retail ventures in their hometowns. Ruben first went to the United States in 1985 at the age of 15. Over the next 30 years, he migrated regularly, working in construction in the United States. In between migrations, Ruben also married, had children, and constructed a home in Mexico. In 2005, Ruben began to prepare for a permanent return. He initially sent back 50,000 pesos ($2,500), which his wife used to purchase a property along the highway that runs through their small town. Over the next 10 years, Ruben invested an additional 200,000 pesos to outfit a hardware store. In 2015, he returned permanently. Thanks to their hardware store, Ruben's family is economically stable and no longer relies on migration for income.

Spatial context is essential to the success of rural entrepreneurs like Ruben and Tomas. Accessibility via major transportation corridors enables Tomas and other small-scale manufacturers to sell their goods by the truckload to regional distributors. Similarly, retail outlets like Ruben's hardware store benefit from state highways that expand their customers to include residents in nearby ranchos. These contextual features provide critical infrastructure for return migrants to invest savings accumulated abroad in new businesses upon return. At the same time, small populations and high poverty rates can limit the returns to skills, even in rural communities proximate to large cities.

Five of our respondents in urban-adjacent communities described applying U.S. technical or social skills to business ventures, but four curtailed their enterprises or changed their labor market plans because their communities lacked sufficient clientele.[6] Consider Juan who worked in a Chinese restaurant in the United States where he developed extensive cooking skills. Juan returned to San Jacinto with woks, spatulas, and other essential tools for preparing American-style Chinese food, with which he intended to open a local restaurant. Yet, upon return Juan opted to limit his restaurant to a supplemental weekend enterprise. As he put it, "San Jacinto is too small and too poor for my business." Juan instead chose to invest the bulk of his U.S. savings in heavy machinery, with which he tills local cropland on a contractual basis.[7] But on the weekends, he and his family can be found dishing out heaping plates of lo mein and General Tso's chicken to their neighbors.

Migrants in urban-adjacent communities who did not remit financial savings (even those who accumulated new skills while abroad) often had no choice but to seek low-wage jobs in the informal sector or take entry-level positions in the many factories that dot Guanajuato's landscape. Consider Victor, one of 13 respondents in urban-adjacent communities who found work in major manufacturing centers. Victor migrated to the United States when he was 18-years old, after completing high school. In the United States, he worked in construction for 12 years, advancing from an unskilled laborer to a foreman earning about $30/hour, where he gained extensive technical skills. In 2012, despite his success abroad, Victor returned home to care for

[6] Except for an isolated instance of several English-language teachers we encountered during exploratory fieldwork, we found no evidence of English-language transfers in rural communities.
[7] We received similar accounts from three of the other four urban-adjacent returnees who planned to apply U.S. skills to their work upon return. Indeed, another returnee also planned to start a restaurant in San Jacinto using skills learned in the United States, but called off the venture citing the same challenges as Juan.

his aging mother. In his poor hometown, there was no demand for the skills Victor gained working in the United States. Unwilling to leave his parents to look for work in a larger city where his skills might be rewarded, Victor opted for an assembly line job at a nearby General Motors factory. Earning the prevailing entry wage of 1500 pesos per week, Victor, like other returnees we interviewed, voiced frustration with the monotony of assembly line work and limited mobility in what is currently one of the fastest growing industries in Guanajuato (Franco and Moran 2016).[8] Yet, his experience upon return exemplifies the most common trajectory among migrants who returned to urban-adjacent communities without financial savings for investment. Return migrants with some education, like Victor, generally found work in factories, while less educated migrants tended to return to unstable low-wage jobs in agriculture, construction, or manufacturing.

Isolation, stagnant mobility, and U.S. dependence

As Table 3 shows, industrial diversification was severely limited in the rural communities we visited, a pattern consistent with national trends (Wassink 2018). Take, for example, Los Guajes, a town of 211 residents, which sits high in the hills of western Guanajuato. Although only 10 miles from the highway, it takes at least 35 minutes by car to reach the town via a rutted dirt road. Our second rural community of less than two hundred residents, Lomas de San Isidro, is similarly reachable only by a dirt road, requiring about 45 minutes by car from the nearest commercial center. Both locales are subsistence communities consisting of small family plots that produce corn and beans primarily for household consumption.

[8] Entry-wages in auto manufacturing range from 1200-1800 pesos a week ($60-90), comparable to informal sector earnings.

We found no pathways through which resources acquired in the United States contributed to economic mobility in these isolated ranchos. In both towns, spatial context dissuaded returnees from investing in even modest manufacturing enterprises like the small brickmaking businesses we encountered in Ojo de Agua. Such manufacturing operations are not feasible without an easily accessible transportation infrastructure. The only businesses that we observed in these isolated communities were two small sundry stores attached to family homes.

These communities' spatial isolation also impeded economic mobility via wage work. Unlike the diverse labor market networks in proximate and urban communities that link returnees to a wide variety of informal and formal sector jobs, the social network structure of these isolated communities consisted primarily of local family and neighbors. This network structure, which is based on strong internal ties with limited connections outside of the community, makes it very difficult for residents to learn about jobs that could provide stable employment and social mobility. For residents in the rural communities that we visited, the only work outside of agriculture required a treacherous journey on scooters to find informal work as day laborers (*jornaleros*) or domestic workers in the nearest cities. [9]

The narratives of Los Guajes and San José de Ornelas are classic examples of rural dependence on migration (Delgado-Wise and Marquez 2007). With no opportunities for entrepreneurship or stable employment, return migrants experience little if any economic returns to the human or financial capital they accumulated in the United States.[10] Overtime, these isolated and agrarian communities became almost entirely dependent on U.S.-migration for

[9] Lengthy commutes over unpaved roads impose additional costs. Multiple respondents reported significant injuries from scooter accidents.

[10] Our respondents invested savings in homes, automobiles, and consumption. These investments enhance living standards, but do not provide long-term economic mobility.

income. This transnational financial dependence creates a heightened vulnerability to macroeconomic and geopolitical forces, which affect access to international work.

In response to the heightened costs associated with undocumented migration, residents' in the two rural communities we visited did not turn inwards to invest their accumulated resources in new economic opportunities. Rather, they sought to adapt to the new migration context by transitioning to guest worker visas. In both communities, seasonal guest worker migration is now the preferred labor market pathway, but it does not lead to economic mobility, only dependence. In Los Guajes, for example, over a dozen men pile into the back of a van each march and drive eight-hours to a labor recruitment agency in Monterrey, where they apply for H2-visas to work in agriculture, landscaping, or construction in the United States. Successful applicants land stable employment for a 6-8-month period, during which they earn the prevailing minimum state wage. Unsuccessful applicants return home where they subsist on agricultural production or seek low-wage work as day laborers in the nearest cities. Nearly half of our rural respondents chose not to work in Mexico, preferring to live on remittances from migrant family members or U.S.-savings earned through seasonal participation in the H-2A and H-2B guest worker programs.[11] The result is a fragile ecosystem in which households rely on an unpredictable visa application process, increasingly based on lotteries and subject to the fluctuating quotas of the Trump Administration (Hernandez-Leon and Hernandez 2017).

[11] H2-visas are temporary work visas that allow entry into the United States for less than one year to workers in low-skill occupations.

Conclusion

Studies of return migration commonly overlook the fact that resource mobilization and labor market reintegration unfold in heterogeneous social contexts (Durand et al. 1996; Lindstrom 1996). As we demonstrated in this paper, migrants' acquisition and mobilization of human and financial capital is a dynamic social process that varies by the characteristics of the communities to which they return—i.e., industrial composition, population size, transportation infrastructure, and proximity to major urban areas. Based on our contextual analysis, we extend three testable hypotheses that can inform future research on international migration and economic mobility.

First, because of their dynamic industrial bases and large diverse populations, we hypothesize that urban areas across the globe will encourage the mobilization of human capital among return migrants. In this study, we found that in saturated urban labor markets new technical skills provide return migrant entrepreneurs an edge over local competitors, while diverse domestic and international clientele recognize and reward accumulated interpersonal and language skills. Interestingly, we found that urban areas privilege the remittance of social, language, and technical human capital skills, over accumulated financial capital.[12] Remitted savings offer necessary investment capital, but on their own do not guarantee the success of nascent ventures in competitive urban markets.

Second, we hypothesize that urban-adjacent rural communities with stable transportation infrastructures and proximity to industrial zones will encourage the mobilization of remitted financial capital but not human capital (Durand et al. 1996). As we found, return migrants can

[12] Other studies suggest that when highly educated migrants return to urban areas, they also benefit from new skills, which can lead to occupational mobility and increased leadership roles in large firms (Williams and Baláž 2005).

invest anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars in small manufacturing operations, agricultural enterprises, or retail stores in these communities that cater to local residents, as well as those in surrounding areas. By contrast, we found that small populations and high poverty rates limit opportunities to invest accumulated human capital in these small communities, which can rarely support enterprises in services, commerce, or even construction, in which migrants might invest new social, technical, or language skills.

Third, we hypothesize that the physical and social isolation that characterizes many poor agrarian communities will limit opportunities to invest human or financial capital in businesses. In these still largely agrarian communities, which have historically constituted the bedrock of Mexico-U.S. migration (Massey et al. 1987), return migrants often rely on temporary migration as an economic survival strategy (Massey et al. 2015), but one that does not enable long-term mobility, only dependence. Our interviews suggest that increased U.S.-immigration enforcement, which disrupted circular undocumented migration, has increased reliance on H-2 visas and elevated economic instability in isolated ranchos like Los Guajes and Lomas de San Isidro.

These hypotheses demonstrate the necessity of considering pre-migration community context in studies of return migration and economic development. Here, our argument parallels the observation that Wassink and Hagan (2018) recently made with regard to premigration individual-level context in their assessment of marginally self-employed returnees. They note that "transitions—both into migration and subsequently into self-employment—reveal a pattern of labor market marginalization that pushes workers… with few marketable skills, to attempt multiple mobility strategies in response to persistently blocked mobility" (Wassink and Hagan 2018:1090). Our investigation suggests that migration from remote rural areas, which often responds to limited local opportunities (Garip 2016), may not improve those same local

economic opportunities, even if it raises living standards within migrant-sending households. Thus, we echo recent calls for the inclusion of local context in survey-based research on return migration and economic development (Hagan and Wassink 2020).

Throughout our analysis, we focused on the process of resource mobilization and economic mobility in sending communities. Yet, a lingering question remains: how does the selectivity of return vary by origin community contexts and potentially affect the labor market successes of return migrants therein? Like most research on return migration, we studied return migrants, not those who opted to remain abroad or engage in transit migration to new international destinations. Although not observing selection into return prevents us from extending causal claims about the "effect" of migration on labor market mobility, it does not undermine the validity of the contextual patterning of resource mobilization and labor market pathways that we observed among our respondents. Future research might investigate how origin community characteristics affect not just selection into return migration (Lindstrom 1996), but also preparation for social and economic reentry among those living abroad.

With that said, not all migrants can reorient toward sending communities and prepare for reintegration prior to return (Cassarino 2004). A growing proportion of return migrants go home involuntarily due to deportation, job loss, early termination of a visa, or fear of family separation (Roberts et al. 2017). Involuntary and/or unplanned return can hinder economic reintegration (Dingeman 2018; Hagan, Wassink, and Castro 2019; Roberts et al. 2017). Because of limited space and the relatively small number of our respondent who were deported, deportation did not feature prominently in our study. Yet, our analysis suggests that the consequences of involuntary returns could vary by local context. In their recent comparative analysis of voluntary and forced return to Mexico, Hagan et al. (2019) attributed a high rate of entrepreneurship among deportees

in urban Mexico to the successful mobilization of human capital. This finding is consistent with our contextual assessment of resource mobilization. Because migrants with little formal schooling acquire new human capital largely incidentally through "learning by doing" (Hagan et al. 2015), unplanned return does not necessarily reduce human capital formation (Hagan et al. 2019). In contrast, savings must be deliberately set aside for an anticipated future purpose, such as business formation. Because of the importance of savings in rural areas, our findings suggest that deportees may encounter greater labor market challenges outside of large cities, where limited returns to new human capital skills could increase the importance of preparation prior to return.

Finally, our findings, which draw on eight years of fieldwork in a historic migrant-sending state in west central Mexico, cannot capture the experiences of all return migrants. Here we note three specific limitations that can motivate future research. First, we conducted our study in a relatively prosperous state in an upper-middle-income country. Research is needed to test our hypotheses in less developed regions of Mexico and in poorer and less-developed migrant-sending countries, which may lack the infrastructure that was central to mobility in two of our three community types. Second, our analysis omitted potentially important contextual variables such as political instability, gang violence, and climate change, which did not feature prominently in our study sites, but are increasingly important contextual factors driving international migration (Basu and Pearlman 2017; Gray 2009). Future studies might consider how an expanded set of contextual variables affect the reintegration of return migrants. Third, we focused on migrants who returned to their hometowns. Yet, as repeat migration declines (Gonzalez-Barrera 2015; Massey et al. 2015), internal relocation could increase if return migrants from poor rural communities relocate to more prosperous cities, where they can better

mobilize their human and financial capital (Hagan et al. 2015; Masferrer and Roberts 2012). Patterns of internal relocation may be most pronounced among involuntary returnees who cannot prepare for labor market reintegration and often have weaker social attachment to their origin communities (Cassarino 2004; Dingeman 2018). We hope our contextual analysis will motivate the integration of a broad set of regional and national features into emerging research on return migration and reintegration in diverse global regions.

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Tables and figures

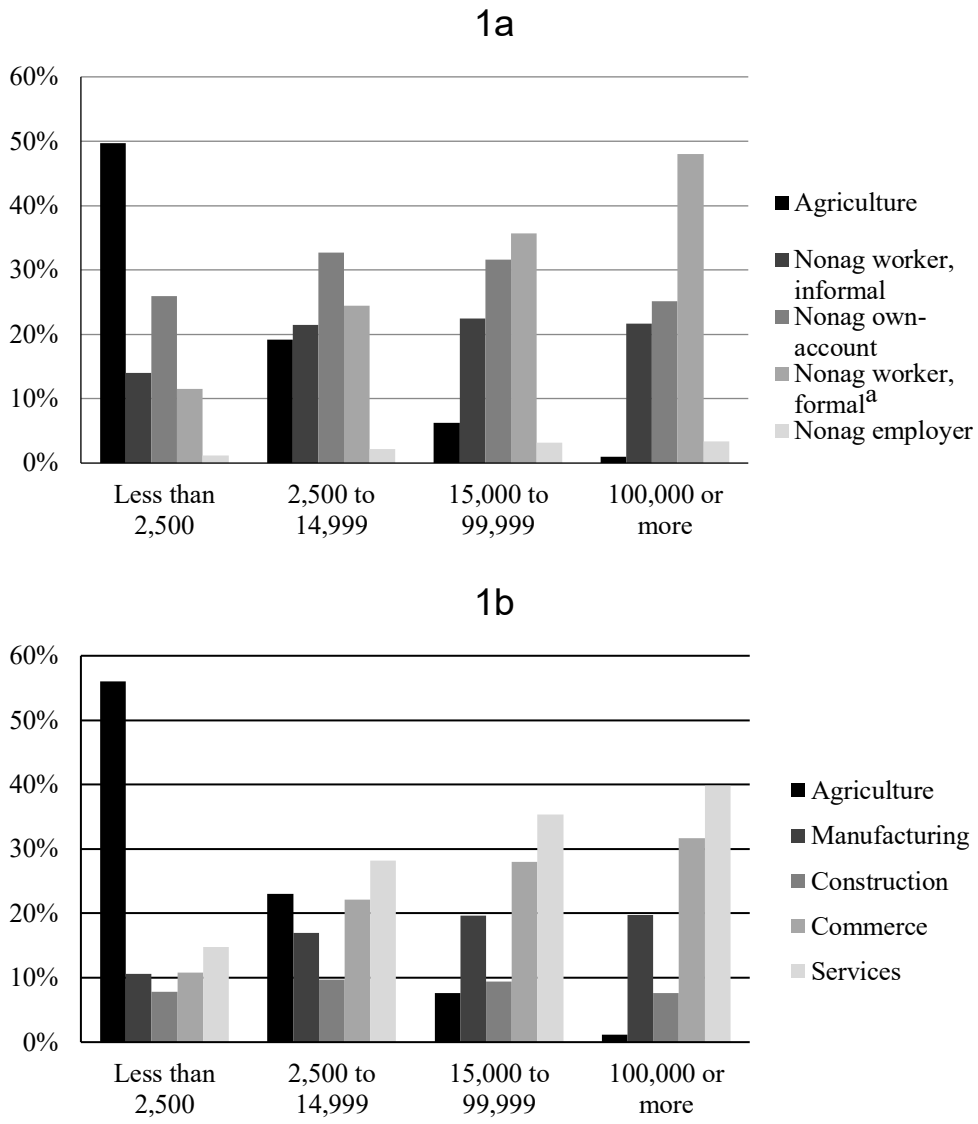

Fig 1. Mexican workforce distribution (1a) and industrial profile (1b) by community size.
Source, 2010 Mexican Census of Population and Housing, n=7,638,288
Nonag = non-agricultural
[a] Formal sector employment is measured using the legal definition – receipt of health insurance through employment (Maloney 2004)

Table 1 Characteristics of study communities

	Interviews	Inhabitants	%Pop 15+ without primary complete	%Homes with dirt floors	%Homes without refrigerators	Accessible via paved roads	KM from municipal center	Time to municipal center (Minutes)
Urban Community								
Leon	93	1,238,962	16%	2%	7%	Yes	NA	NA
Rural Communities								
Rural and proximate	43	2,119	37%	8%	30%	Yes	11	21
Casa Blanca	7	4,058	39%	4%	16%	Yes	19.8	29
San Miguel Zapotitlán	12	153	18%	0%	6%	Yes	12.3	26
Cuesta de Mezcala	3	4,439	32%	3%	34%	Yes	14.8	28
San Jacinto	5	2,896	34%	12%	24%	Yes	13.1	27
Mezcala	7	1,462	39%	4%	24%	Yes	9.5	20
Ojo de Agua	5	1,186	52%	13%	57%	Yes	3.7	9
San José de Ornelas	4	637	43%	19%	48%	Yes	5.2	10
Rural and isolated	17	202	39%	5%	39%	No	23	50
Los Guajes	13	211	33%	2%	49%	No	21.7	61
Lomas de San Isidro	4	193	45%	8%	28%	No	24.3	39

Source: CONAPO's 2015 Index of Marginalization

Table 2 Respondents' demographic backgrounds, work histories, and migration experiences, 2010-2017

	Urban (n=93)			Rural and proximate (n=43)			Rural and isolated (n=17)		
	Mean/%	(Min/Max)		Mean/%	(Min/Max)		Mean/%	(Min/Max)	
Demographic background & pre-migration work experience and educational attainment									
% male	83%	--	--	100%	--	--	100%	--	--
Mean age at most recent interview	45	(26	83)	46	(22	88)	46	(28	71)
Marital status at most recent interview									
% Single (Never married)	6%	--	--	10%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Married	84%	--	--	83%	--	--	100%	--	--
% Divorced/widowed	10%	--	--	7%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Had children at most recent interview	86%	--	--	71%	--	--	88%	--	--
% Completed secondary school (9-years of schooling)	46%	--	--	46%	--	--	25%	--	--
% in labor force prior to migration	99%	--	--	100%	--	--	100%	--	--
Timing and reasons of departure, US work history, and migration experience									
Mean age at first migration	25	(2	54)	24	(8	62)	26	(15	44)
% in US labor force	100%	--	--	100%	--	--	100%	--	--
% Migrated multiple times	47%	--	--	83%	--	--	94%	--	--
% Documented on most recent trip	5%	--	--	24%	--	--	65%	--	--
Reason for most recent trip[a]									
% Economy need/lack of opportunity	70%	--	--	82%	--	--	100%	--	--
% Learn/improve	29%	--	--	3%	--	--	0%	--	--
% To invest in a business	4%	--	--	2%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Other[b]	13%	--	--	15%	--	--	13%	--	--
Timing and reasons of return									
Mean age at most recent return (years)	33	(15	66)	38	(17	73)	40	(18	56)
Reason for most recent return[a]									
% Family reunification	56%	--	--	51%	--	--	41%	--	--
% Expiration of a temporary guest worker visa	2%	--	--	15%	--	--	59%	--	--
% deported	15%	--	--	17%	--	--	0%	--	--
% Other reasons[c]	42%	--	--	30%	--	--	36%	--	--

[a] Responses do not sum to 100 because respondents could cite multiple reasons.

[b] Other included personal invitation, health, divorce, education, religion, and tourism

[c] Other reasons for return included: boredom, loneliness, fear of deportation and racism, difficulty finding work, a medical operation, higher education, personal problems, health, completed migration goal, and to start a business.

Table 3 Labor market status, industrial profile, and resource mobilization upon return

	Urban	Rural and proximate	Rural and isolated
Primary labor market status upon return			
% Not economically active	12%	14%	47%
% Peasant farmer	2%	5%	35%
% Non-agricultural worker, informal	22%	33%	18%
% Non-agricultural self-employed without employees	17%	9%	0%
% Non-agricultural worker, formal	28%	23%	0%
% Non-agricultural employer	19%	16%	0%
Industrial profile of economically active respondents upon return			
Agriculture	2%	11%	67%
Construction	15%	29%	33%
Manufacturing	36%	29%	0%
Services	29%	32%	0%
Commerce	18%	0%	0%
Resource mobilization upon return			
% Remitted money for investment[a]	21%	72%	47%
% Applied skills learned in the US to work in Mexico	54%	21%	6%

[a] Almost all of our respondents remitted money to support household consumption. Thus, we highlight those who remitted money to support particular investments. The proportions here include personal investments (most often houses) and labor market investments (most often businesses and occasionally higher education).

APPENDIX A

Table A1 compares a summary of our longitudinal urban sample against those respondents who we were unable to relocate in 2015. As the Table shows, respondents lost to follow-up were on average younger, more likely to be male, and better educated than those we interviewed in both 2010 and 2015. This discrepancy suggests that return migrants may indeed systematically sort into re-migration, be it internal or international. Recent evidence reveals a negative association between years of schooling and repeat undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States (Massey et al. 2015). Yet, numerous studies find that individuals relocate internally when they perceive a mismatch between their skills and opportunities in the local labor market (Jones et al. 2019). We are not aware of any studies that have examined internal migration among return migrants. Yet, it is reasonable that, in the context of rapidly declining repeat U.S.-migration (Massey et al. 2015; Schulthies and Ruiz Soto 2017), Mexican returnees would sort into internal relocation based on their skills and the economic opportunities available in their local communities.

Because we did not follow our respondents who migrated internally or collect information about their internal migration histories, we cannot examine internal migration among return migrants. Rather, we restrict our analysis to resource mobilization and economic mobility among our respondents. Specifically, we examine how these patterns vary across communities. In the conclusion, we discuss how resources acquired abroad might encourage internal migration upon return depending on the local context. We hope that our discussion will encourage future studies of internal migration among returnees in Mexico and elsewhere.

APPENDIX TABLES

Table A1. Assessment of bias due to sample attrition

	Original sample	Longitudinal sample
Demographic characteristics		
Male (%)	89%	81%
Age in years (median)	35	39
Married/civil union (%)	82%	83%
Human capital characteristics		
Years of schooling (median)	9	6
Years of work experience (median)	20	21
Total number of jobs (median)	5	5
Ever directed/supervised others (%)	36%	40%
Migration characteristics		
Age at first migration (median)	17	17
Transferred skills from U.S. to Mexico (%)	50%	54%
Number of jobs in the U.S. (median)	2	2
U.S. duration in months (median)	30	24
Remitted money for investment (%)	17%	22%
Undocumented (%)	90%	90%
Ever deported (%)	9%	15%