



Northern America hosts the largest concentration of migrants in the world, most of whom are long-term immigrants. Between 1990 and 2005, the number of migrants living in Canada and the United States increased by 17 million between 1990 and 2005 – the largest influx to any region in that period – to reach a total of 44.5 million. *See table 1 next page.* The most notable flow has been northward from Central America and Mexico to the United States. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that 10.7 million people born in Mexico are residing in the US; 6.7 million of them are workers.

Remittances sent home by these migrants provide a major benefit to families in Latin America and the Caribbean. Remittances to Mexico totaled about \$18 billion in 2005, the remainder of the countries in the region are likely to have received an overall amount that is similar or larger. Countries in which remittances constitute a large percentage of gross domestic product include Haiti (22.1 per cent), El Salvador (16.5 per cent), Jamaica (16.4 per cent), Nicaragua (11.8 per cent) and the Dominican Republic (10.4 per cent).

According to the US-based Urban Institute, currently there are about 11 million undocumented migrants in the US, of whom about 6.2 million are Mexican. Concern in the US about the impact of migrants on jobs, wages and ability of local governments to provide services, and difficulties in stemming the flow of undocumented workers across borders has made immigration an emotional national issue. A 2006 study by the Pew Hispanic Center nevertheless found little or no correlation between levels of immigration and unemployment rates in US localities, and other studies generally show that undocumented workers contribute more to government coffers than they take out.

Figure 1: Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1986-2005

Source: Canadian Immigration Statistics, 2005 (Statistics Canada, 2005), and U.S. Immigration Statistics, 2005 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005).

Figure 1 shows that immigration to the United States and Canada has increased significantly since 1986. The United States has received a much larger number of immigrants than Canada, with a steady increase over the period. The number of immigrants to the United States has grown from approximately 1.5 million in 1986 to over 8 million in 2005. In contrast, immigration to Canada has increased from about 0.5 million in 1986 to approximately 2.5 million in 2005.

In addition to migration north to the US, an increasing number of Latin Americans are moving to Western Europe, particularly to Spain and Portugal.

Family Reunification

Family reunification continues to be the cornerstone of migrant admissions in the US and Canada, although a declining one in the latter nation. During 1990–2002, 65 per cent of permanent immigrants to the United States were admitted under family preferences. In Canada, the equivalent proportion was 34 per cent.

In Canada, applicants for permanent residence are selected on the basis of a point system, with higher scores assigned to individuals with upper-secondary or university education. Since 1965, the United States has had an employment-based preference to accommodate the admission of immigrants with needed skills; the ceiling for visas in that category was raised to 140,000 annually by the Immigration Act of 1990.

A number of developed countries maintain special programmes for the admission of low-skilled workers. Canada and the United States are among the countries that have seasonal worker programmes, mainly to satisfy labour demands in agriculture. In addition, Canada allows young citizens of selected countries to travel and work within the host country for periods that can last for one or two years. (They are called “working holiday makers”.) These young migrants are most likely to find temporary jobs in low-skilled occupations.

The United States stands out as the main destination for people seeking higher education abroad, with the majority of such students coming from Asia and Europe. In 2002, 583,000 foreign students were enrolled in accredited US educa-