

# A Survey of Oaxacan Village Networks in California Agriculture

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## Executive Summary

We originally set out to survey Mixtec farm workers because they kept appearing in news reports as suffering the worst living conditions and employment abuses of any farm workers in California agriculture. The resulting study, *Mixtec Migrants in California Agriculture: A New Cycle of Poverty* (Zabin, et al., CIRS, 1993), reported on a survey of 131 Mixtec farm workers conducted in 1990-1991. But in the process of conducting that survey, we realized there were many more Mixtec migrants in California agriculture than had been thought, and that we needed a better overview of the situation.

The Ford Foundation, via the Rural Economic Policy Program at the Aspen Institute, awarded us a supplemental grant to canvass rural areas of California for Mixtecs. We spent virtually every dollar on surveyors who, during August and September 1991, visited areas of known concentrations of Mixtecs. Because of our limited budget, we excluded large cities from our purview and focussed on a specific set of agricultural areas. For this reason, the data presented should be seen as a pilot effort to chart Mixtec migrant networks rather than as a complete census. From south to north, the areas surveyed were:

- Northwestern San Diego County
- Santa Maria (Santa Barbara County)
- Bakersfield, Arvin, and Lamont (Kern County)
- Selected towns in western Tulare County
- Selected towns from Kerman and Biola eastward in Fresno County
- Madera and environs
- Parts of Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties

In addition to the 567 surveys conducted in the places noted, this report also draws on: the above-mentioned 131 surveys of Mixtec farm workers, which were completed mostly in the Fresno-Madera and San Diego regions (Zabin, et al. 1993); approximately 50 brief interviews conducted mainly in San Diego County in 1989; 30 surveys of Mixtec tomato workers, which were included in a study for the Commission on Agricultural Workers, conducted in Fresno, San Diego, and San Quintin (Baja California) in 1991-92 (Runsten, et al. 1992); several life histories of Mixtec leaders; and several independent lists of village migrants (1991).

### How many Mixtecs in California agriculture?

The main objective of this survey was to make a direct count of as many self-identifying Mixtecs in California as possible within the financial and human constraints of the project. How many indigenous Oaxacan workers are there in California agriculture? We counted 6,687 indigenous Oaxacans in 47 California towns (4,081 men, 1,151 women, and 1,455 children 12 years old or younger). Projecting these counts onto the towns not surveyed gives a total of 10,565. A fair estimate of total population, correcting for survey coverage of 10-50 percent in each location, would triple that figure to 31,695. We conclude that a reasonable estimate of the number of mostly Mixtec indigenous Oaxacans (excluding the Zapotecs in Los Angeles) in California in 1991 would fall between 20,000 and 40,000 -- and the

numbers have surely grown in the past three years.

A reasonable estimate of the peak seasonal population of Mixtecs in California now might approach 50,000. If 75 percent of this population works in agriculture, then Mixtecs make up 5 percent of the California agricultural labor force. Of course not everyone migrates to the United States every year, so the total population of Mixtecs migrating is larger. This first-ever count of indigenous Oaxacans in California, while far from a complete census, nevertheless yields an absolute bottom count which is now available for use with other information to estimate actual numbers.

### **Where do they migrate to?**

A second objective of the survey was to gain information about the spatial distribution of Mixtecs in California. This information is relevant both to questions about the incorporation of Mixtecs into agricultural labor markets, and to the changing economic and ethnic composition of rural California communities, which is accompanied by a presumed increase in rural poverty and "ghettoization" (Palerm 1991).

Oaxacans have been migrating to California since the 1960s, with a significant increase in the mid-1970s, and an even greater increase in the 1980s. In 1990-91, we interviewed a number of migrants who were among the first people from their villages to arrive, and the appearance of new villages in rural California shows no sign of abating. There is a deepening of U.S.-bound migration in many villages, but there is also a broadening, which suggests a large potential future migration to the United States.

Nevertheless, the Oaxacan migrants tend to be clustered in particular communities in California: we found that the 9 California towns with migrants from 20 or more villages accounted for 52 percent of all village-town correspondences. Our surveyors counted at least some Oaxacans in 47 California towns, and the village networks referred us to another 53 towns, for a total of 100 California locations in 24 counties -- some only seasonally. Though this may seem like a large number, Oaxacans trek a very limited path considering that there are approximately 2,000 places with population in California.

### **Where do they come from?**

A third objective of the survey was to identify the geographic patterning of the sending communities in Oaxaca. A working assumption of research on Mixtec migration is that it is provoked in large measure by ecological deterioration and economic stagnation in the Mixteca region. This report yields a long list of towns in Oaxaca that can be used to research migration from the region and its relation to a variety of economic and environmental factors. Much of the published work on Mexican migration has focussed on a narrow set of villages in western Mexico; the research presented here is an exercise in widening our knowledge of Mexico-to-United States migration.

According to our study, indigenous Oaxacans working in California hail from 203 towns -- with another 6 villages reported, but which we were unable to confirm -- representing 81 municipios (out of 570 municipios in Oaxaca) from 22 Oaxacan districts (out of 30 districts). It would be fair to say that virtually all of these villages have representatives working in California agriculture.

Juxtlahuaca, Silacayoapam, and Huajuapam were the major sending districts to the areas we studied. Taken together, these three districts accounted for 5,200 of the 6,687 people found, or 78 percent. While the districts of Silacayoapam and Huajuapam were home to the largest numbers of municipios migrating to the United States, in terms of proportions of municipios migrating, Juxtlahuaca, Silacayoapam, Putla, Zaachila, and Huajuapam dominated.

### **The impact of IRCA**

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) had a different impact on Mixtecs than on mestizos from traditional sending regions. The evidence we have indicates that about one-half of U.S. migrants

from Oaxaca were legalized by IRCA. However, this is a relatively small proportion of the village populations. Unlike west-central Mexican mestizo communities, where IRCA served to legalize a backlog of U.S.-settled families, with the Mixtecs it mainly legalized the circular male migrants. This then caused a sudden change in the evolution of migration from Oaxaca, as it conferred legal status on a group of essentially seasonal farm workers, coming from village networks that had not yet evolved stable, year-round patterns of employment in the United States. Legal status has facilitated back-and-forth migration and led to settlement, but it has not changed the Mixtecs' pattern of employment, which is more a function of a network's time in the United States than it is legal status.

Because the Oaxacan networks are not as developed as mestizo village networks and do not control access to jobs in many places, the Oaxacan settlers are a poorer population than the mestizo groups. As a result, Mixtecs hold the least desirable, lowest paying jobs in agriculture, are subject to more labor law violations -- such as non-payment of wages -- and migrate more than the better established mestizo migrants. Mixtecs have been used by farm labor contractors and other farm employers to undermine existing agricultural labor markets; accelerating migration makes stabilizing such labor markets more problematic without increased labor protections.

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Although there has been some recognition of the large and growing Mixtec presence in California -- especially in rural areas -- until this survey there has been no data base that could be referred to in response to questions such as, How many are there? Where are they located? and, What regions of Oaxaca are they from? This survey was designed to speak to these and related questions, and in so doing to compile a preliminary data base of Mixtec demography and migration patterns. The demographics are particularly relevant to the changing ethnic and economic composition of California towns. Furthermore, the results are of potential use to the various Mixtec self-help organizations that have formed in California to deal with the problems faced by Oaxacan migrants. In addition to providing them with information about the distribution and composition of their constituencies, it is hoped that the data will be useful to them in planning and coordinating their activities and for fundraising purposes.

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To download the full formatted version of this survey (Word Perfect 6.0), click [here](#) while holding down the shift key.



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