

Section V.
Language and Culture

Executive Summary:

- There are 6 million native language speakers in Mexico. The major Mexican native languages--Maya and Nahuatl--are not spoken much in rural California. The three indigenous languages spoken widely by farmworkers are Mixteco, Zapoteco and Triqui.
- The total number of Mexican native language speakers (in both countries) may be declining. Pressure on the young to shun their parents' language is widespread in Mexico and the United States.
- In California, within the family, it is common for the parents and children to communicate across generations in a second language for both sides, namely Spanish.
- The obligations to the hometown are strict and are crucial for maintaining loyalty to the community of origin. There are various examples of expatriate assemblies of hometown representatives meeting in their adopted United States who have authority over hometown affairs back in Mexico.
- The system of *usos y costumbres* has become controversial. Some argue that its flexibility enhances community life, others that its arbitrary nature undermines democratic decision-making.
- The system of obligations is evolving in some communities and discussions are going on among community members about how to harmonize the old customs with new realities.
- The ICS shows that individuals with family in the hometown remit at high levels to their families; but those with family in the US tend to decrease their remittances over time.
- However, collective remittances and collective work obligations to the community do not decrease over time. In fact, there seems to be more interest in giving to public works in the village as the immigrants stay longer in the United States.

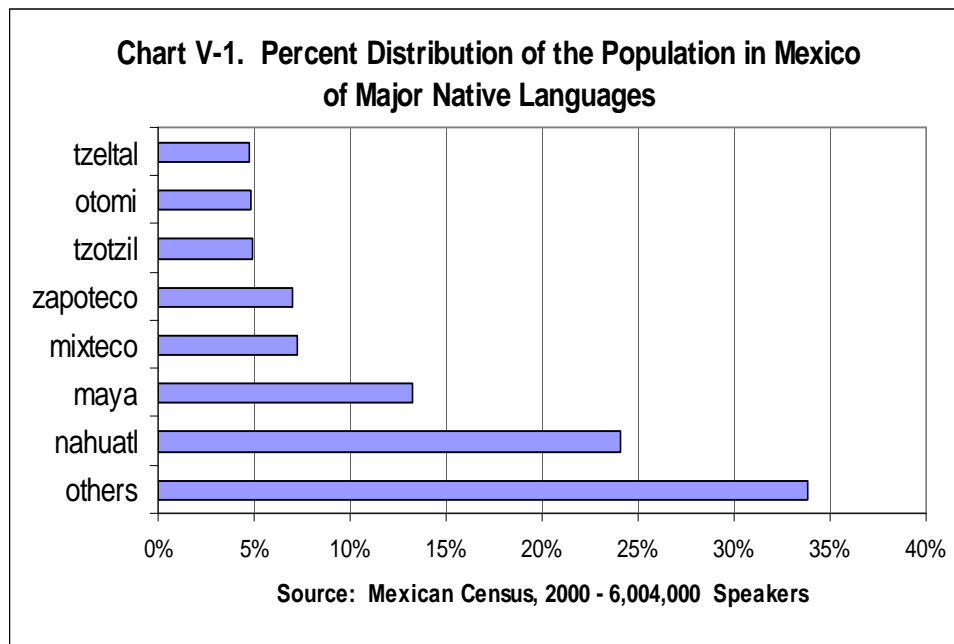
V-1 Introduction:

In this section, we provide details about the variety of languages spoken by California's indigenous farmworkers and the unique community obligations that influence the immigrants' behavior. We start by explaining how the most important indigenous languages spoken in California agriculture are a rather small subset of the huge language mix in polyglot Mexico. Then, we note the impending decline of these languages and the role of language in California's indigenous households. Next, we give details about the community organizational structure with its extraordinary focus on the hometown. Finally, we use evidence from the ICS to explain how the immigrants fulfill their work and monetary obligations to their hometown from the settlements in the United States.

Interestingly, those who stay in California for many years continue to fulfill their obligations to their hometown.

V-2 Main languages spoken in California Agriculture:

Mexico has over six million native language speakers distributed among many distinct languages.¹ Only seven of these languages (listed in Chart V-1, below) make up two-thirds of all the indigenous language speakers in Mexico. Although all seven of these languages are spoken by California farmworkers, only those who speak two of these—the Mixtecos and the Zapotecos, have a large presence in the state’s fields and orchards. Each of these two groups have about a half million speakers between the two countries. There is a third group with a major presence in California agriculture, the Triquis, but this is a smaller linguistic community with only about 40,000 speakers in Mexico and the United States combined. These three language groups together represent a large majority (88%) of the Mexican indigenous groups in California agriculture.² The other groups, such as the Nahuatl and Maya, although numerous in Mexico, have a small presence in California agriculture. In all, in the Indigenous Farmworker Study, we found 23 different indigenous languages spoken representing 13 different Mexican states.³



V-3 Potential threats to the native languages:

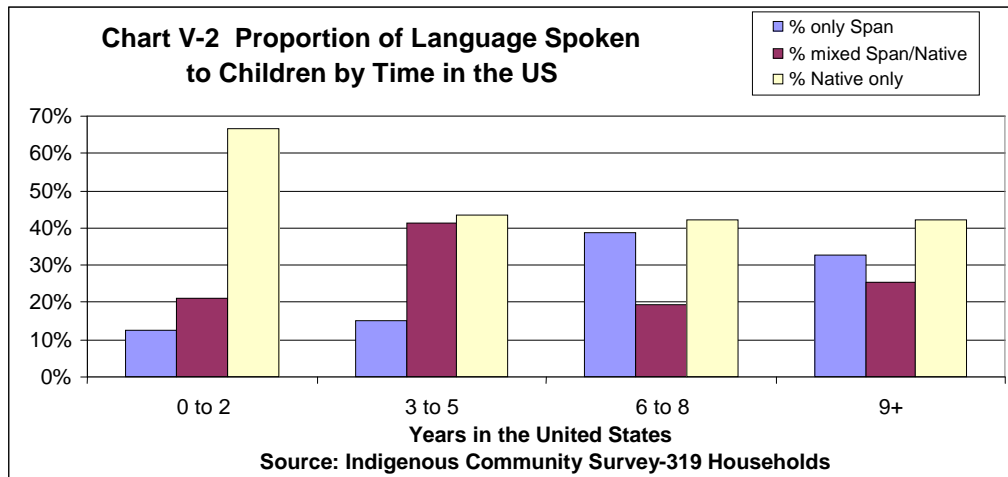
¹ Many Mexican languages have variants that are not necessarily mutually intelligible even within the same language. There were over 250 native languages at the time of the conquest. There are reported to be 68 still spoken. The [Catálogo de Lenguas Indígenas 2008](http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=272&Itemid=58) reports 11 language families, 68 language groupings, and 364 variants. See http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=272&Itemid=58

² See Chart II-2 , Section II, p. 10

³ These data were collected during the Hometown Count carried out by the IFS in late fall of 2007 (see Appendix IV for details).

The indigenous language speakers of Mexico as a group are facing a severe language survival challenge in the decades to come. The population of the speakers of these languages had been increasing steadily from a total population of about 3 million in 1970 to 6 million by 2000. However, for the first time in 2005 a small decline was registered in the population of these indigenous language speakers in Mexico. It could be a turning point has been reached.⁴ One major reason for the decrease is the declining proportion of native language speakers among the younger groups in Mexican hometowns.⁵ The young indigenous Mexicans are losing interest in their ancestral tongues. Two other major factors are a falling birth rate and the emigration of the indigenous to the United States and urban Mexico.

It is no surprise that the issue of disappearing language is also a major issue among the representative nine hometown network groups we studied in detail. This problem, depending on the hometown network, is observable in the hometowns, at the border, and in the California settlements. First, the use of the native language is declining in many of the home villages in Oaxaca and Guerrero. Many in the younger generation in the hometowns themselves seem more attracted to the internet than to the native language of their forbearers. These networks all have co-villagers living along the border. In Tijuana, we interviewed several families who spoke to their children in Mixteco. According to the informants their children understood the parents' native language but were reticent to speak it.⁶ However, we observed many children actually speaking Mixteco to their parents in the border settlements.



In rural California, the pressure on the young to shun the native language of their parents also appears quite common but not universal. In the ICS, we asked respondents whether they spoke exclusively in their native language to a range of their relatives. Almost all

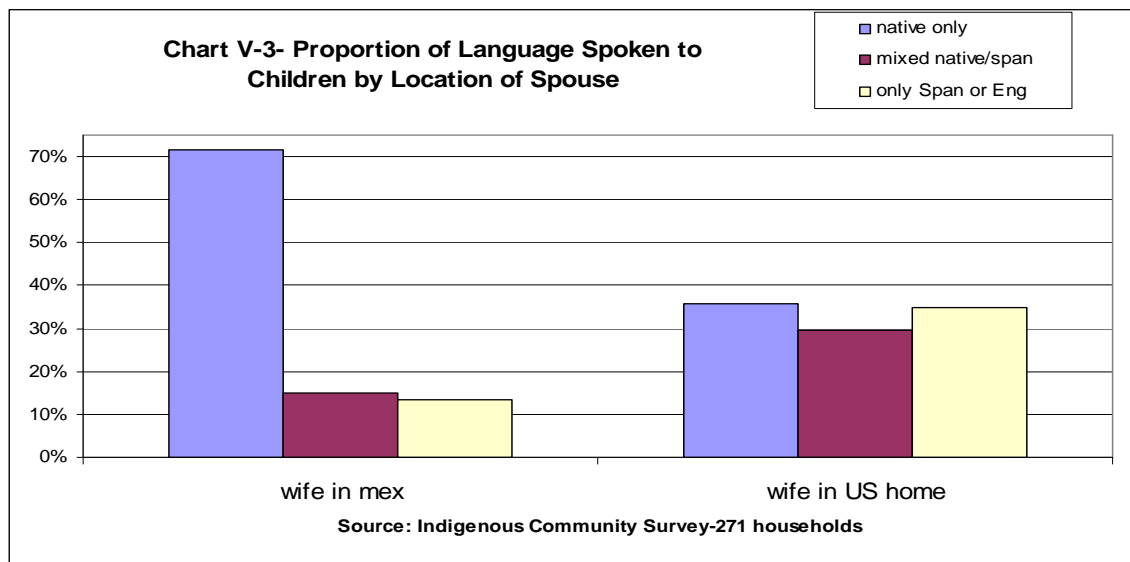
⁴ See Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2006

⁵ See Gráfica 2, p. 174 in Fernández, García, and Ávila, 2002

⁶ According to one Mixteco informant on the border: “The majority of the children don’t want to speak it (el mixteco)”, interview with Anna Garcia, May 2008, Valle Verde, Tijuana

speak the indigenous language to their parents and a large majority speaks it to their spouses and siblings. However, the practice of speaking in the native tongue to children declines as soon as the family gets established in the United States. For the newcomers, who have been in California for two years or less, over two-thirds speak to their children exclusively in their native language (see Chart V-2, above). However, once established here for three or more years the rate drops to about 40% where it apparently remains. It appears that a large minority continues the tradition of speaking only in the native language (40%) while the rest (60%) once established in California speak either only Spanish or a mixture of Spanish and the native language to their children.⁷

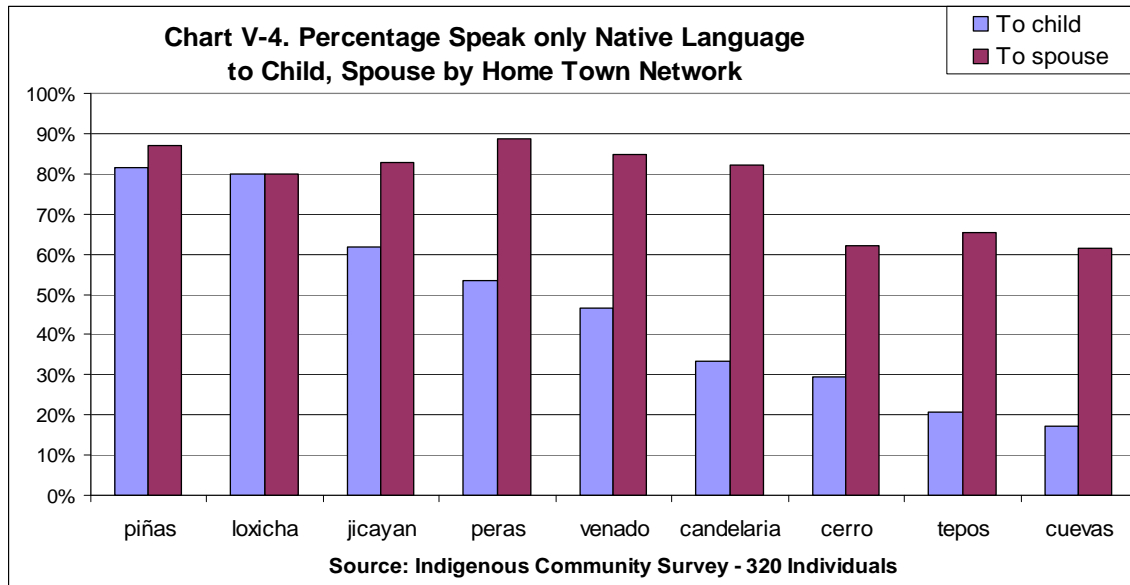
There is clear evidence from the ICS that bringing children to the United States accentuates language loss. If we divide the group into those whose wife is in Mexico with the children and those whose wife is present in the U.S. household, we find that many more parents speak only the native language to their children in Mexico than in the United States (see Chart V-3). In Mexico, in these nine indigenous communities, over 70% of the parents speak the indigenous language to their children while in California half as many (35%) do.



Although the majority, address their spouses in the language of their hometown idiom, speaking the native language to one's spouse varies somewhat from one hometown network to another. In the very settled Mixteco communities of Santa María Teposlantongo and San Miguel Cuevas and the Chatino community of Cerro del Aire only about 60% speak their native language to their spouses whereas for all the other hometown networks (Mixteco, Zapoteco and Triqui), 80% or more speak to their spouses in their ancestral tongue (see Chart V-4). However, the variation of speaking the hometown language to the children varies enormously depending on the network. Only about 20% of the parents in the settled networks from Tepos and Cuevas speak to their

⁷ The constant influx of new immigrants from the hometowns to California tends to increase native language use even by those who are long time U.S. residents.

children in the native language, while 80% of the parents from San Juan Piñas and Magdalena Loxicha do (Chart V-4, below).



V-4 Language challenges within the families

There is a major language barrier that exists within families among California's indigenous population. As can be seen in Chart V-3 above, many parents (about one third when both parents are present in California) speak only Spanish to their children. The parents are usually most fluent in the indigenous language and speak Spanish in a limited fashion. But many of the children, born here or who have come at a very early age, speak English as a first language.⁸ Therefore, although both the parents and children speak some Spanish, it is a second language for both sides that becomes the *de facto lingua franca* of the household. This intra-family language barrier occurs on top of the already extreme cultural shock for these rural and traditional people trying to raise their children in an unfamiliar and for them often uncontrollable environment. This language barrier may explain some of the communication problems experienced by clinicians who attempt to communicate with indigenous parents through their English-speaking children.⁹

V-5 The hometown-- the cultural focus of indigenous communities:

The hometown locality is cherished by the indigenous communities. First, the agricultural land, water and surrounding pasture and forest lands are usually communally owned and are seen as the source of the uniqueness of the community's culture and of its

⁸ Many rural California towns use Spanish as a lingua franca. As a result, it is not uncommon for the young people (born or early arrivers) to speak Spanish better than English.

⁹ Edward Kissam drew our attention to this problem. Personal communication with Edward Kissam, September, 2009.

economic survival. Moreover, the customs and language of the hometown is the focal point of identity for this people who traditionally have lived out their lives according to strict rules of mutual community obligations.¹⁰ The people report that the stringent enforcement of loyalty to their hometown and its customs has ensured the survival of their communities as separate peoples in the face of efforts at cultural extermination by the colonial Spanish and then the Mexican governments. The customs vary greatly from one community to another in the Oaxaca and Guerrero area, which is the source of most of California's indigenous farmworkers. However, there are a series of general traits shared by most speakers of the original languages of Mexico. The land usually cannot be bought or sold and usufruct rights are enjoyed only so long as the community participant is a citizen in good standing of his hometown. This implies holding a series of community-service positions (*cargos*) and performing work assignments (*tequios*). Traditionally, there is very little marriage outside the hometown and property changes hands normally through inheritance rather than by sale.

The community citizens living in (or visiting) the home communities meet in assembly in the middle of the year and select the people obligated to carry out the *cargos* in the following year. This assembly usually has traditionally been made up of the adult married males in the community. In recent years, in part due to the lack of men in the hometowns, increasingly women have been allowed to exercise more citizenship rights.¹¹ However, it is important to remember that, by and large, women's participation has remained limited and constrained to traditional female roles.¹² In some communities, those men who have completed all the *cargos* make up a Council of Elders or Principals that has special influence over the decisions of the community assembly. Often, if one does not do service to the community, one can lose one's property, including one's own house. In other words, one literally owns one's own real property only if one participates in the community. In the mestizo communities, small property ownership is quite common and the obligation to serve the community is not normally seen as obligatory. Most of the indigenous informants report a strong obligation to their home community even if they have lived the greater part of their adult life in Baja California or the United States.¹³ People who do not serve their communities can be fined and even jailed upon returning home to their native towns.¹⁴ Non-complying community members can also lose their right to be buried in their hometown.

The *cargos* can be quite numerous. In San Juan Piñas, for example, we counted 91 *cargos* that need to be performed in one year (including 7 women *promotoras de la clínica*, these last being the only *cargos* held by women, and they were non-voting positions). These include the positions of mayors, treasurers, secretaries, land

¹⁰ Kearney and Besserer, 2004, and Navarette Linares, 2008, p. 45

¹¹ According to one study, 248 of the 418 Oaxacan municipios that practice "usos and costumbres" have participating women. See also Kearney and Besserer, 2004

¹² For the constraints on recent female participation see Kearney and Besserer, 2004

¹³ One man who has not lived in San Agustín Atenango for many years makes about \$350 a month in Baja California in the strawberry industry. He pays \$60 a month (a fifth of his income) in various fees to the community to maintain the right to keep his house there. Interview with Richard Mines in Vicente Guerrero, June 2008

¹⁴ Interview with interviewee from San Martín Peras, Watsonville, CA, Anna Garcia, December, 2008.

commissioners that run the towns and protect the surrounding pasture lands and forests. Plus, there are a series of committees to maintain the school, church, clinics, water supply and roads. All are staffed without compensation to the office holder. This system of free service to the community is nearly universal in these areas. The cargos usually include civil as well as religious (festival) obligations. The duties can be quite costly to the individual and serve as a way of reducing the wealth disparities in the community since successful members are often assigned to the expensive jobs of organizing festivals whose benefits are enjoyed by all. A man who begins young serving in the most humble cargo and who eventually completes all of the cargos, reaches old age imbued with great respect.

The system of indigenous governance and maintenance of community services is called '*usos y costumbres*' in Mexico. In many Mexican states, the rules in this system have been given official status by law. The rules, since they are not written but passed down by a verbal tradition, can be flexibly adapted to the particular situation confronting the community. But, by the same token, this lack of written rules may appear arbitrary to participants who resent the lack of a secret ballot, or their exclusion from citizenship because they are women or are deemed not to have fulfilled their community duties. The Oaxacan law of 1995 that recognized '*usos and costumbres*' as prevalent in most Oaxacan municipalities is controversial. Some say it protects the rights of the indigenous from interference from 'mestizo' authorities while others say it discriminates against women and has enshrined undemocratic practices from the past.¹⁵

In the second half of the twentieth century, as permanent and back-and-forth migration became a large feature of these communities, it has become difficult to find available candidates for the cargo and tequio obligations. First, since so many adult married males are absent from the community, women and unmarried men have been drawn upon in some cases to fulfill the duties of governing and maintaining the hometown.¹⁶ Moreover, this lack of manpower has meant that occupants of the posts do not have to climb up the pyramid of jobs starting at the bottom any longer. It is common to see a very young man as '*agente municipal*' or mayor of a hometown in indigenous Mexico.¹⁷

Informants from some villages report that individuals working in California who cannot return to the village to do their "tequio" service send money home either to their parents or siblings, so that the individual receiving the money can pay another individual to perform the service for the émigré living in the U.S. In one community, in order to get out of serving in some of the higher cargo jobs, one has to pay a \$1,500 fine.¹⁸ Obviously, to leave a good job in the United States to return home is a huge burden for many in the United States. For this reason, some indigenous immigrants, even after

¹⁵ Aguilar Rivera, 2008; see also Kearney and Besserer, 2004 who mention the case of San Jerónimo del Progreso that has maintained its independence from Silacayoápam, the county seat, which is a Mestizo town.

¹⁶ It is not uncommon for an absent male to be assigned to a cargo over a female who is present in the hometown, according to Maria Christina Velasquez cited in Kearney and Besserer, 2004.

¹⁷ For discussion of the changing rules of the traditional system of Usos y Costumbres, see Cornelius, 2009, especially the essay by Jorge Hernandez Díaz.

¹⁸ Interview of Anna Garcia with resident of Concepcion Itunyoso, April 2008.

many years in California, prefer work in the informal agricultural sector to allow them the flexibility to return home and comply with their 'cargos' obligations.¹⁹

These 'cargos' can be seen as burdensome to the individual but they also hold together communities where many inhabitants have to leave at a very young age to make a living. Community development projects on both sides of the border may be able to benefit from maximizing the positive aspects of this system and minimizing the negative ones. In San Juan Piñas, for example, the community has made substantive changes that might serve as examples to other communities. They have limited the cargos that were previously three years in length to just one and a half years in length. In most communities, people are obligated to take turns funding several religious fiestas during the year. In San Juan Piñas, they have eliminated the obligation for many of the minor fiestas and focused all responsibilities on the single annual celebration of their town saint. In the past, there has been an exclusionary policy toward villagers who have converted from Catholicism to other (evangelical Christian) religions. Many of these converted families have fled San Juan Piñas and forfeited their property. But recently, the town authorities have allowed these people to re-enter the village and visit their relatives if they agree to do some 'secular' jobs. And, finally, the town has introduced a policy of fining families who allow their children to drop out of secondary school, a decision that has promoted education in the village. The costs of the cargo system are quite high all across the indigenous region. Huge sums are spent on fiestas—a custom that is often exacerbated by the deeper pockets of the émigrés in the United States who are expected to provide ever more lavish fiestas. The idea of channeling these resources for productive purposes is being openly discussed by members of many communities.²⁰

In many cases, the indigenous communities have adapted their governance procedures to involve those living abroad. In the case of Santa Maria Tindú, an assembly in Madera, California, and another one in northern Oregon meet and exercise a critical influence on activities that take place in the hometown.²¹ In another Mixteco town in Puebla, émigrés in New York City exercise close control over affairs in their native town.²² Members of the San Juan Piñas community living in the Central Coast town of Santa Maria have formed an association with immigrants from the neighboring towns Tierra Colorada, Santa Cruz Yucucani and San José Yosocañu in order to raise funds to repatriate the remains of a deceased for burial in the hometown.²³

In both the Mexican border areas and in California, organizations have been formed that have successfully grouped people from across many hometowns.²⁴ Some of the groups

¹⁹ Interview of Richard Mines with immigrant from San Miguel Cuevas, September 2008

²⁰ See discussion of this in Navarette Linares, 2008, p. 68

²¹ See Rocío Gil, *Fronteras de Pertenencia*, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, México, 2006, pp. 218-224

²² Smith, 1994

²³ Interview by Sandra Nichols with Jesús Estrada, Santa María, November 6, 2007.

²⁴ Two of the current organizations active in Pan-ethnic activity are the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales based in Fresno and the Unidad Popular Benito Juárez based in Bakersfield. The California Rural Legal Assistance and the United Farm Workers of America both have small groups of indigenous speaking outreach workers that promote indigenous rights.

have forged a pan-ethnic (and transnational) indigenous identity. This process results from conditions in the emigration settlement areas that tend to unite distinct indigenous groups against discriminatory practices suffered at the hands of the greater dominant non-indigenous society.²⁵

V-6 Individual obligations to the hometown-evidence from the Indigenous Community Survey:

The answers to questions in a survey about remitting money to families, to the hometown and about fulfilling service obligations are colored by guilt and regret.²⁶ For reasons explained above, a large majority feel a deep obligation to make these contributions to their families and communities. However, often the desire to meet these obligations is blocked by lack of sufficient income in the United States.²⁷

Across the communities, we found that people with a spouse with them in the United States remit less to their families back in Mexico over time. But, surprisingly, as people stay longer, and as communities acquire deeper roots north of the border, their rates of 'collective' remittances and fulfillment of community obligations do not seem to decrease.

Men whose wives are living with them in the United States show a steep decline in remitting money home over time. For these spouse-accompanied men who have been here for two years or less, 69 percent of the remitters send money once a month or more. However, for long-stayers, the remittances drop off considerably. For those with spouses living with them with 9 years or more in the United States, only 23 percent remit once a month or more.

Regardless of time in the United States, remittances seem to vary according to personal obligations in the hometown. About three out of four of those remitters whose spouse is in Mexico send money once a month, while those with the spouse living with them in the United States remit only that frequently about a third of the time. About half of the unmarried individuals remit once a month or more. Those whose wife and children are in Mexico must remit to their dependent nuclear family frequently, and the unmarried are under strong pressure to remit to support their parents and siblings. However, those who are living with their spouse in the United States believe their first obligation is to support

²⁵ For a discussion of the pan-ethnic groups see three articles in J. Fox and G. Rivera-Salgado, 2004, including Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera, "Building Civil Society among Indigenous Migrants", Kearney and Besserer, "Oaxacan Municipal Governance in Transnational Context", G. Rivera and Luis Escala, "Identidad Colectiva y Estrategias Organizativas entre Migrantes Indigenas y Mestizos." Also see Navarete Linares, 2008, p. 127

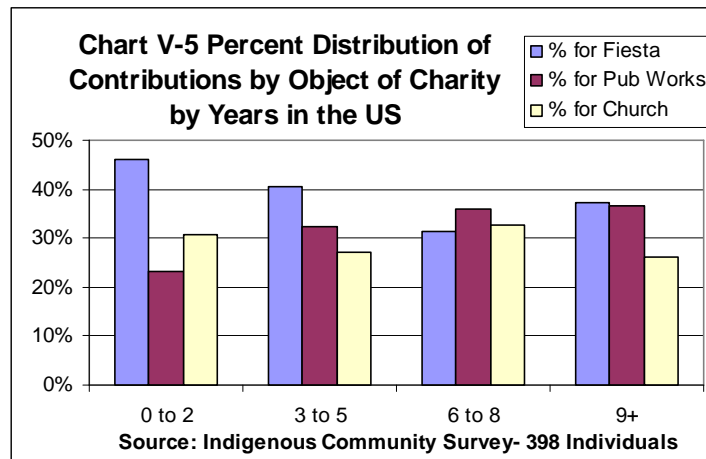
²⁶ Some respondents preferred not to answer questions about remittances to family.

²⁷ Overall, 338 respondents or 85% tell us that they have remitted money to their families in the year before the interview. Of these, only 265 tell us the number of times per year that they remit money home—73 don't respond to this question of frequency, in some cases this may be due to embarrassment. Of those that respond about half (47%) say that they remit at least once a month (12 times a year) and the other half (53%) indicate that they send money back 8 times a year or less.

their nuclear family and feel less obliged to send needed resources to their parents back home unless they have children being raised by the grandparents.

V-7 Collective obligations to the hometown-evidence from the ICS:

As with individual family remittances, the proportion of people who give some kind of collective remittance to the hometown is quite high—three quarters of the respondents say that they contribute.²⁸ However, in contrast to individual remittances, the proportion that contributes for collective community activities does not decline as the migrants spend more time in the United States. Those with 6 years or more in the United States are actually somewhat more likely to contribute than the more newly arrived.

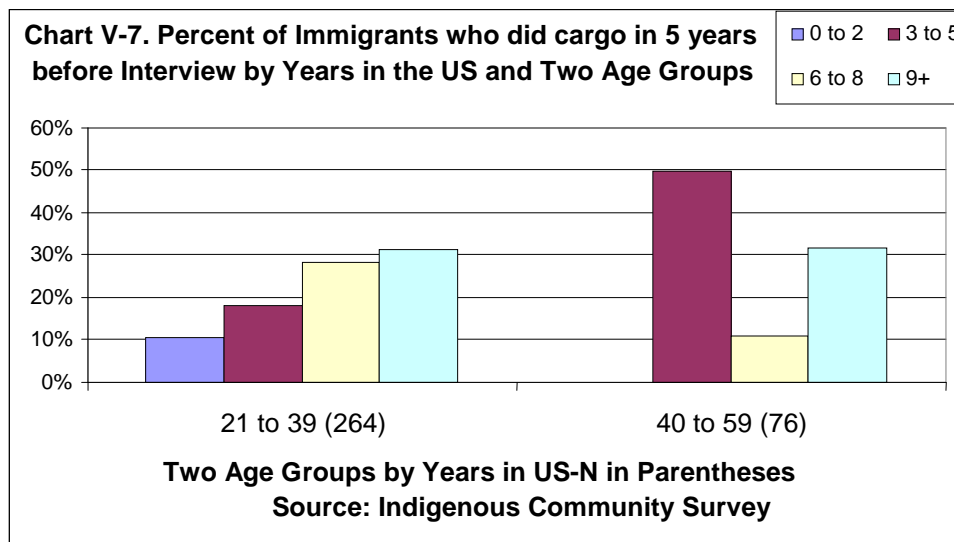
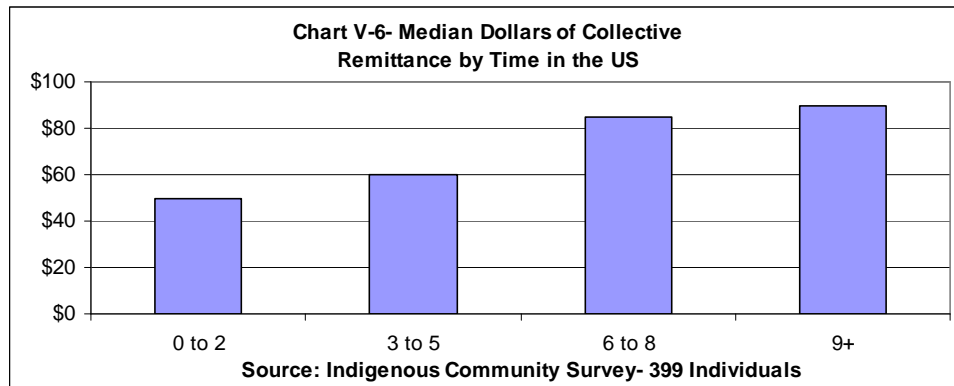


We also asked respondents to identify the purpose of their monetary contribution to the home village. The answers fell into three categories: to church construction projects, to fiestas and to public works. The biggest two were for fiestas and for public works while contributions to church projects were somewhat less generous. The contribution for fiestas seems to predominate in the early years in the United States for the immigrants. And, although fiestas continue to attract a large proportion of contribution dollars, there is a decline in their relative importance over time (see Chart V-5, above). However, the interest in helping with public works in the hometown shows a small increase over time. Public works represents 23% of the contributions for those with two years or less in the United States but 36% for those with 9 years of more of tenure north of the border. It appears that over time, émigrés, though still interested in financing fiestas, maintain and even increase their interest in improving the infrastructure in their hometown.

To be sure, the amount of the gift is on average relatively small—the median is \$80 per year. But, again, the more settled in the United States, with presumably fewer ties to the hometown, are much more generous in their gifts than the new arrivals to the United States. The newcomers in the United States—those with less than two years here—give a median of just \$50 per contributor while those here nine years or more give a median of

²⁸ In many communities, women are not expected to make a contribution. Only 55% of women make a contribution to the hometown in the ICS data.

\$90 (see Chart V-6, below). Also, those with a spouse in Mexico give much less per contributor (median \$50) than their more settled co-villagers with a spouse in the United States (median \$100). This is due in part to the fact that the man whose wife and children are in the village is sending larger family remittances than one whose wife is in the United States, leaving less income available to donate to the community.



As we discussed above, the immigrants also have work (tequio) and office-holding responsibilities (cargos) to their hometowns. With respect to these obligations, our data in Chart V-7 above demonstrate that the commitment to collective obligations to the hometown does not decline as a result of longer residence in the United States. For the largest age group, the 21 to 39 year olds (left side of Chart V-7), the commitment increases with time in the United States from 10% for those in the United States for less than two years to 31% for those with nine or more years of U.S. residence. For the smaller and older group from 40 to 59 (right side of Chart V-7), the pattern is harder to explain. The biggest commitment for this age group is for those in the United States from 3 to 5 years. These men came to the United States at an already advanced age with many years in the hometown. And, many of them (50%) returned home to fulfill their

commitments.²⁹ Also, the ones who have stayed for 9 years or more in this older group fulfilled their cargo service (32%). Although the sample sizes are quite small, the data demonstrate a continued commitment to the hometown over time by both age groups.³⁰

In sum, the indigenous immigrants whose families are in the United States remit less over time to their families in Mexico. However, the collective obligations, both monetary and in terms of work, are actually more significant for those who have stayed for awhile in the United States than for those who are recently arrived. Admittedly, the long-stayers have accumulated more assets and can more easily afford to be generous towards their home community than those with shorter time spent in the United States. But this pattern of allegiance to the hometown also attests to the discipline of loyalty exercised by the hometown network on the indigenous immigrants.

²⁹ This may be due to their having already served multiple lower level cargos and so they continue to serve to maintain seniority and preserve their 'investment' in the system.

³⁰ Overall, just one quarter of the immigrants say that they have done a cargo in the last 5 years. These responsibilities seem to be carried out more by men (29%) than women (12%). Also, young people seem exempt until about 21 years of age. For the tequio, our data show that young people appear obligated from age 18. Not surprisingly, those men with wives in the village return more often to do a cargo (45%) than those without a spouse in the hometown.