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Municipalities and Counties on the Mexico-United States Border: Population Changes, 2000-2020

Municipios y condados de la frontera México-Estados Unidos: cambios en la población, 2000-2020

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes contrasting population dynamics across five county/municipality pairs along the Mexico-U.S. border between 2000 and 2020. The objective is to compare changes in population size and structure by major age groups, as well as the evolution of Mexican-origin population in U.S. border counties. The methodology relies on a comparative analysis of the 2000, 2010, and 2020 population censuses of both countries, employing an operational definition of the border region centered on highly urbanized county/municipality pairs. The findings indicate a deceleration in population growth during the second decade, more advanced aging patterns on the U.S. side, and a sustained increase in the Mexican origin population. A limitation of the study is its focus on five predominantly urban pairs, which does not fully capture rural border heterogeneity. It concludes that these demographic transformations carry significant binational economic and political implications, reaffirming the strategic relevance of border demographic analysis.

Keywords: 1. population, 2. growth, 3. borders, 4. county/municipality, 5. Mexico-United States.

RESUMEN

Se analizan las dinámicas poblacionales contrastantes en cinco pares condado/municipio de la frontera México-Estados Unidos entre 2000 y 2020. El objetivo es comparar los cambios en volumen y estructura por grandes grupos de edad, así como la evolución de la población de origen mexicano en los condados estadounidenses. La metodología se basa en el análisis comparativo de los censos poblacionales de ambos países (2000, 2010 y 2020), utilizando una definición operativa de región fronteriza centrada en pares urbanos de alta concentración demográfica. Los resultados muestran una desaceleración del crecimiento en la segunda década, un envejecimiento más avanzado en los condados estadounidenses y un incremento sostenido de la población de origen mexicano. El estudio se concentra en cinco pares urbanos, lo que no captura plenamente la heterogeneidad rural fronteriza. Se concluye que estas transformaciones demográficas conllevan importantes implicaciones económicas y políticas binacionales, reafirmando la relevancia estratégica del análisis demográfico fronterizo.

Palabras clave: 1. población, 2. crecimiento, 3. frontera, 4. condado/municipio, 5. México-Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S.-Mexico border has long functioned as a meeting ground for two contrasting population dynamics. On one side, Mexico continues to experience sustained internal migration driven by the pursuit of employment and improved living standards. This movement has historically flowed toward the northern states—Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas—which are widely regarded as offering greater economic stability. That perception is closely linked to the consolidation of the maquiladora industry as the principal productive sector in the area, as well as to geographic proximity to the United States, which fosters commercial exchange and dense social and cultural cross-border ties that are rarely found elsewhere in the country. Over time, these internal migration flows have become a key driver of demographic growth and economic development, particularly in several border municipalities.

In contrast, along the United States side, both the states that make up the southern border—California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas—and their border counties display markedly different socioeconomic contexts. Their patterns of demographic and economic growth are not directly tied to internal migration. In some California counties, such as San Diego, strategically targeted federal investment underpins the local economy, while in others, such as Imperial, agriculture remains the dominant sector. In Texas counties including El Paso, Cameron, and Hidalgo, commerce and services play a central role, closely linked to economic activity in neighboring Mexican cities such as Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and Reynosa and Matamoros, Tamaulipas (Zúñiga, 2011; Fuentes, 2022; Banco de México, 2023).

Taken together, these features have sustained scholarly attention on the border from multiple perspectives. Interest stems not only from its role as the dividing line between two markedly different nations, but also from the profound transformations it has undergone over the past three decades. Four factors have been especially consequential: *(1)* the tightening of United States immigration policy after September 11, 2001; *(2)* shifts in bilateral migration governance; *(3)* the 2007 housing crisis; and *(4)* the growing arrival of Central American migrants[2] at the northern border of Mexico seeking asylum in the United States, driven by violence, poverty, and limited opportunities in their countries of origin (Selee et al., 2019; Alba, 2024). As a result, migration to the United States—whether from Mexico or Central America—has become a sensitive and central issue in the disputes shaping the region (Mollá, 2011).

Over recent decades, population growth in border county-municipality pairs reflect three main forces: *(1)* migration flows, *(2)* cross-border economic dynamics, and *(3)* shifts in migration policy. This article advances the hypothesis that these forces are reflected in the age structure of

[2] Central American migrants traveling overland through Mexican territory follow a range of routes and corridors that converge in border cities such as Reynosa, Tijuana, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, Agua Prieta, and El Sásabe. Where they face abuse and exploitation by organized crime, migration authorities, and public security forces (De la Rosa & Antony, 2020).

local populations, and that their effects become visible along the border in the size and proportional distribution of each age group.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this article is to examine changes in the age structure, by major age groups, in five county-municipality pairs along the Mexico-United States border, as well as the population of Mexican origin residing in the United States counties during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. The selected municipalities are predominantly urban and concentrate a large share of the border population; however, despite this shared characteristic, each pair exhibits a distinct demographic relationship between the municipality and the county. The data sources for Mexico include the Twelfth Population and Housing Census 2000,[3] as well as the general censuses of 2010 and 2020 from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). For the United States, the analysis draws on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, specifically the 5% sample of the 2000 Census, the 10% sample of the 2010 Census, and the 2020 Census.

The article is organized into four sections. First, it provides an operational definition of the Mexico-United States border as the set of counties and municipalities adjacent to it. Second, it presents a characterization of the five selected county-municipality pairs. Third, it examines the age structures, by major age groups, of these five pairs, as well as changes in the population of Mexican origin residing in the counties during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Finally, the concluding section underscores the continued relevance of this border in light of new evidence on the demographic, economic, social, cultural, and political transformations taking place in this space, which shape national policy and everyday life in both countries.

BACKGROUND: DEFINING THE MEXICO-UNITED STATES BORDER

The study of population processes and regional dynamics in the Mexico-United States border region has been approached from multiple disciplines and theoretical frameworks, depending on the specific focus of each inquiry. In most cases, analysis begins by defining the concepts of "border" and "border region," moving from general to more specific considerations, including their functions, the interactions they enable or constrain, and the conceptual boundaries within which the terms are applied. In its broadest sense, a border refers to the line that separates one nation from another (Martínez, 1994). An international border, more specifically, may be understood as a line established through treaties and agreements between sovereign states, delineating the limits of their territory and jurisdiction. This distinction is essential, since territorial delimitation determines the spatial scope within which states exercise full sovereignty (Rodríguez, 2008, p. 19).

Regarding the establishment of borders and their visibility, these may take two forms: "Formal borders may be natural or artificial; natural borders are visible on the ground and represented on maps, whereas artificial borders are not physically visible" (Tamayo Pérez, 2015, p. 116). In this context, the Mexico-United States border constitutes an international boundary that separates the

[3] Unofficial translation of XII Censo de Población y Vivienda 2000.

territories of the two countries. It extends approximately 3 145 kilometers and ranks among the most heavily crossed borders in the world (Payan et al., 2020). The northern border region of Mexico can in turn be divided into two subregions: the northwest, a semiarid zone stretching to the Pacific Ocean, and the northeast, where the natural boundary is the Rio Grande, which flows into the Gulf of Mexico (Hernández, 2020).

A border can also be conceptualized as more than a dividing line; it serves as the foundation for the formation of a social space (Spener & Staudt, 1998). From a relational standpoint centered on the interactions between neighboring communities, the border functions as a zone of encounter, proximity, exchange, constraint, and diffusion (Ranfla, 1984; Zúñiga, 1998; Oliveros, 2002). By contrast, the border region, or borderland, refers to the area adjacent to the boundary, whose spatial extent is defined by the geographic scope of interaction with the other side (Martínez, 1994).

The 1983 La Paz Agreement, signed by Mexico and the United States, defines a border zone extending 100 kilometers on each side of the international boundary. This zone includes 15 sister-city pairs, 25 U.S. counties, 35 Mexican municipalities, and 33 Indigenous tribes (Mollá, 2011). However, any attempt to define the border remains, to some extent, arbitrary, since there is no single accepted meaning. Its interpretation varies according to the issues under examination, the available data, and the particular dimensions one seeks to emphasize (Payan & Cruz, 2020).

A more operational definition, particularly for the purpose of generating population data from available sources, is to define the "border" as the geographic area comprising the 36 counties in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas that are affected by it and collectively designated as the "Southwest border region" (Clement, 1982, p. 143). In Mexico, the border region has been operationally defined as the set of 35 municipalities adjacent to the United States border (Zenteno & Cruz, 1988). More recently, however, Payan and Cruz (2020) expanded this delimitation to include 23 counties and 36 municipalities (Payan & Cruz, 2020).

In a more recent study drawing on 2020 census data for both Mexico and the United States, Gerber defined the border strip using the population of the 23 counties adjacent to Mexico and the 39 Mexican municipalities bordering the United States. Based on the 2020 census, this delimitation accounts for 7 763 819 inhabitants in the Mexican municipalities, representing 6% of the total population of Mexico, and 7 782 547 inhabitants in the United States counties, equivalent to 2% of the total population of the United States (Gerber, 2024).

Given that the population on both sides of the border is predominantly urban, and that the specific aim of this study is to compare these populations and their evolution over time, the operational definition of county-municipality pairs is adopted to delimit the border region. For this purpose, five pairs were selected, which concentrated 73.1% of the border population in 2020.[4] In

[4] According to 2020 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the combined population of the counties of San Diego, Imperial, El Paso, Hidalgo, and Cameron was 5 635 791, representing 72.4% of the total population residing along the southern border of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a). In Mexico, the 2020 Population and Housing Census reports that the municipalities of Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez,

addition to being the most urbanized areas along the border, these pairs share more than a century of historical linkage with their counterparts across the boundary. The selected pairs are: (1) San Diego, California / Tijuana, Baja California; (2) Imperial, California / Mexicali, Baja California; (3) El Paso, Texas / Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; (4) Hidalgo, Texas / Reynosa, Tamaulipas; and (5) Cameron, Texas / Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

These county-municipality pairs function as key nodes of cross-border interaction, where mobility, economic exchange, and shared governance are most visible. They illustrate the central role of binational coordination in shaping migration dynamics, trade flows, security practices, and environmental management along the border. Building on this framework, the following section examines population levels and growth trends in these five county-municipality pairs over the 2000–2020 period.

POPULATION AND GROWTH IN THE FIVE COUNTY-MUNICIPALITY PAIRS, 2000-2020

On both sides of the border, the population is unevenly distributed along the territorial divide between the two countries, with a marked concentration in a limited number of predominantly urban counties and municipalities, even as the region as a whole has become highly urbanized (Gerber, 2024). By 2020, the five Mexican municipalities selected for this study accounted for 73.6% of the total population in the Mexico border region, while the five U.S. counties represented 72.4% of the population residing along the southern border of the United States. Beyond their demographic weight, these county-municipality pairs are also central due to their high volumes of trade and cross-border transit, their influence on local and national economies, and their prominent role in migration dynamics and binational cooperation in areas such as public health, security, environmental management, and economic development.

Although a higher quality of life is widely perceived across municipalities along the northern border—largely driven by employment opportunities created through the maquiladora industry—clear regional differences emerge in an east-west comparison. In cities such as Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa, and Matamoros, economic activity is strongly oriented toward services and freight transportation. In contrast, Tijuana and Mexicali show a predominance of tourism, cross-border mobility, and agricultural development closely connected to economic networks across the border, particularly in Imperial County, California.

Across the border region of the United States, the regional context follows a different trajectory. Beginning with San Diego, known for a high standard of living, a high level of urbanization, and the largest population along the southern border, and extending to Cameron, where economic activity centers more on services and agriculture, such contrasts reveal the uneven nature of the

Reynosa, and Matamoros had a combined population of 5 731 511, accounting for 73.6% of the total population of the northern border municipalities (INEGI, 2020).

southern U.S. border region, where the significance of adjacent Mexican regions varies considerably along the line of demarcation.

To gain a clearer understanding of these contrasts, the following section reviews population patterns for the five selected county-municipality pairings from 2000 to 2020. Table 1 compiles total population figures and growth dynamics over the two decades, situating the comparison at both the national level and within the respective state jurisdictions on each side of the border. An initial reading of the data indicates that in 2000 the United States had a population nearly three times larger than the population of Mexico. Over time, however, this gap narrows: in 2010 the population was 2.9 times larger, and by 2020 the figure had declined to 2.6 times. This shift reflects a higher growth rate in Mexico (1.18) compared with the United States (0.71) during the period under review.

Table 1. Population Levels and Growth Trends in Selected Mexico-United States County-Municipality Pairs, 2000, 2010, & 2020

	Population			*Growth rate*	
Municipality/County	*2000*	*2010*	*2020*	*2000-2010*	*2010-2020*
Mexico	97 483 412	112 336 538	126 014 024	1.37	1.18
United States	281 421 906	308 745 538	331 449 281	0.93	0.71
Baja California	2 487 367	3 155 070	3 769 020	2.30	1.82
California	33 871 648	37 253 956	39 538 223	0.95	0.60
Tijuana	1 210 820	1 559 683	1 922 523	2.45	2.14
San Diego	2 813 833	3 095 313	3 298 634	0.95	0.64
Mexicali	764 602	936 826	1 049 792	1.97	1.17
Imperial	142 361	174 528	179 702	2.04	0.29
Chihuahua	3 052 907	3 406 465	3 741 869	1.06	0.96
Texas	20 851 820	25 145 561	29 145 505	1.87	1.48
Ciudad Juárez	1 218 817	1 332 131	1 512 450	0.86	1.30
El Paso	679 622	800 647	865 657	1.64	0.78
Tamaulipas	2 753 222	3 268 554	3 527 735	1.66	0.78
Texas	20 851 820	25 145 561	29 145 505	1.87	1.48
Reynosa	420 463	608 891	704 767	3.59	1.50
Hidalgo	569 463	774 769	870 781	3.08	1.17
Matamoros	418 141	489 193	541 979	1.52	1.05
Cameron	335 227	406 220	421 017	1.92	0.36

Source: Own elaboration based on data from Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, National Institute of Statistics and Geography) (2000, 2010, 2020), and the U.S. Census Bureau (2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2020a).

A comparison at the state level reveals even sharper demographic contrasts. In 2000, California had a population 13.6 times larger than Baja California. Over the following two decades, however, this disparity steadily declined, reaching 11.8 times in 2010 and 10.5 times in 2020. During this period, Baja California recorded a growth rate that surpassed both California and the national

average in Mexico, suggesting continued population expansion in the state in the coming decades if current trends persist.

Texas, Tamaulipas, and Chihuahua present a similar but more dynamic pattern. Texas maintained a population between seven and eight times larger than either Tamaulipas or Chihuahua. Unlike California, however, Texas recorded growth rates that surpassed those of its Mexican counterparts and also exceeded the national rate in the United States. Between 2000 and 2010, Texas registered a growth rate of 1.87%, followed by 1.48% in 2010–2020. In contrast, Chihuahua recorded 1.06% and 0.96%, while Tamaulipas posted 1.66% and 0.78% during the same periods. National growth in the United States ranged from 0.93% to 0.71%. These figures illustrate differences not only between the two countries but also within them, highlighting the marked demographic contrasts among border states.

Tijuana-San Diego

In 2000, the population of San Diego, California, was 2.3 times larger than the population recorded in Tijuana. By 2010, however, the Mexican municipality accounted for roughly half the population of San Diego County. During the 2000–2010 period, Tijuana registered a higher growth rate (2.45%) than San Diego (0.95%). In the following decade, 2010–2020, growth slowed on both sides of the border, with rates declining to 2.14% in Tijuana and 0.64% in San Diego. Even so, San Diego came to represent 1.7 times the population of Tijuana by 2020.

Differences in population size stem from the particular contexts that shape each county and municipality. Within the group of U.S. border counties, San Diego County stands out for rapid expansion throughout the twentieth century, accompanied by strong urban concentration, comparatively high average incomes, and a diversified economic base. Key sectors include technology, biotechnology, defense, tourism, and higher education. San Diego is widely associated with high living standards, prominent academic and research institutions, and well-established tourist destinations. At the same time, geographic proximity to Tijuana has encouraged sustained economic and cultural exchange, generating mutual benefits on both sides of the border.

Tijuana experienced particularly rapid expansion during the first half of the twentieth century, driven largely by tourism from the United States during the Prohibition era. [5] This influx stimulated the development of infrastructure and services designed to meet growing demand for entertainment and leisure venues. Over time, Tijuana also consolidated an industrial profile, supported by a strong service sector, while becoming a major destination for migrants from across Mexico and other regions of the world. Taken together, Tijuana and San Diego form the binational urban corridor with the highest volume of border crossings worldwide (Vera, 2015; Zúñiga, 2011; Payan et al., 2020). This sustained mobility underscores the enduring significance of cross-border interaction in everyday social and economic relations in the short, medium, and long term.

[5] By the late 1920s, the Volstead Act banned the sale of alcoholic drinks and gambling in the United States (Barajas Escamilla, 2016, p. 117).

Mexicali-Imperial

In 2000 and 2010, the population of the municipality of Mexicali, Baja California, was 5.4 times larger than that of neighboring Imperial County, California. During the same period, their growth rates were similar: 1.97% annually for Mexicali and 2.04% annually for Imperial. By 2020, the population gap had widened to 5.8 times. Between 2010 and 2020, however, their growth rates diverged markedly: Mexicali recorded an annual growth rate of 1.29%, while Imperial grew by only 0.22% per year.

These differences in population size, as well as the fact that a larger number of residents live on the Mexican side, are largely explained by the economy of Mexicali—centered on the maquiladora industry, agriculture, and trade—which attracts migrants from across Mexico.[6] Population growth in the city remains significant and has been accompanied by rapid urban expansion, along with continued improvements in infrastructure and public services to meet the needs of a growing population.

In Imperial, agriculture remains a central pillar of the local economy, complemented by trade and other activities tied to the Mexico border. Close interaction with Mexicali has encouraged strong economic and social linkages that have influenced demographic patterns in the county. The population is diverse, and the Hispanic population has grown steadily, reflecting the cultural influence of the neighboring city to the south.

Ciudad Juárez-El Paso

The population of the municipality of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, was nearly twice the size of the population of El Paso, Texas, in 2000 and 2010, as well as in 2020. Although El Paso recorded a higher growth rate than Juárez during the first decade, it fell to below 1% annually in the second. In contrast, the rate in Juárez increased compared to the previous period, rising from 0.86% between 2000 and 2010 to 1.3% in 2010–2020, possibly as a result of return migration and the increasing difficulty of crossing into the United States.

Ciudad Juárez and El Paso are widely known as twin cities, since population growth in both has followed similar patterns over time, forming one of the largest binational metropolitan areas, characterized by strong economic interdependence (Fuentes, 2022). As one of the largest and most dynamic cities along the northern border of Mexico, Ciudad Juárez has experienced sustained population growth driven by the expansion of the maquiladora industry, which attracts workers from across the country in search of employment (Secretaría de Desarrollo Agrario, Territorial y Urbano [SEDATU] et al., 2024, p. 116). El Paso, in turn, has benefited from a strategic location as a major center for trade and transportation along the United States-Mexico border. The population includes

[6] Among to various productivity indicators, among Mexican metropolitan areas that stood out for their importance in 2020 were Tijuana, Mexicali, Juárez, Reynosa, and Matamoros, particularly for their participation in the secondary sector, their employed population, and the sector's GDP (SEDATU et al., 2024).

a strong Hispanic presence, reflecting cultural and family ties with Ciudad Juárez and other regions of Mexico. Population growth has also supported urban development and the expansion of public and educational services, reinforcing the role of El Paso as a key city in the border region.

Reynosa-Hidalgo

In the case of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, and Hidalgo, Texas, the population of the U.S. county was slightly larger than that of the Mexican municipality in 2000 (1.4 times larger), 2010 (1.3 times larger), and 2020 (1.2 times larger). During the first decade, both populations recorded annual growth rates above 3%. However, this rapid expansion shifted markedly in the following period, with rates declining to 1.5% per year in Reynosa and 1.17% per year in Hidalgo. This sharp change in population dynamics over a relatively short period can be directly linked to internal migration within Mexico, shifts in immigration policy in the United States, and the 2007 housing crisis in that country, all of which reduced labor demand while increasing deportations and return migration to Mexico.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Reynosa experienced a period of rapid growth driven by the expansion of the maquiladora industry and the increase in cross-border trade. The city attracted thousands of workers from other regions of the country seeking employment in assembly plants and related industries (SEDATU et al., 2024, p. 121). Together with merchandise flows and customs services, these factors contributed to the economic dynamism of the region.

Growth in Hidalgo County has been shaped largely by proximity to the Mexican border and by a role as a major crossing point and hub for international trade. The local economy has benefited from the expansion of commerce and agriculture, as well as from growth in the service and tourism sectors. The population has also experienced a significant increase in the Hispanic population, reflecting the cultural and social influence of Reynosa and other areas of northern Mexico. Overall, this section of the border has been characterized more by the circulation of goods than by the movement of people. It is a region marked by strong agricultural and industrial development and, since the final decades of the twentieth century, has exhibited growth patterns distinct from those observed in other border areas (Margulis & Tuirán, 1986).

Matamoros-Cameron

Matamoros, Tamaulipas, and Cameron, Texas, have comparable population sizes, although the population of Matamoros was larger in 2000, 2010, and 2020 (1.3 times the size of Cameron). During the first period, Cameron recorded a higher growth rate than its Mexican counterpart; however, the trend shifted sharply in the following decade, with the annual rate declining from 1.92% to just 0.36%. This change was largely associated with restrictive immigration policy in the United States, increased deportations, and the return of people of Mexican origin to Mexico.

Matamoros, one of the most dynamic urban centers along the northern Mexico border, experienced sustained population growth in recent decades, driven by internal and international migration, industrialization, and the expansion of maquiladora production (SEDATU et al., 2024, p. 124). As industrial and commercial activity expanded, the city strengthened its role as a regional

employment hub, attracting migrants from across the country. Cameron followed a similar path during the first decade of the twenty-first century, supported by its border location and growth in trade, agriculture, tourism, and higher education. The Hispanic population increased substantially, and 88.5% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, with people of Mexican origin representing the largest group (Vera, 2015, p. 148). Unlike many other U.S. border counties, the economy of Cameron is based primarily on services, which distinguishes its development within the region.

In sum, between 2000 and 2020, shifts in population dynamics across border counties and municipalities were shaped by factors such as the 2007 housing crisis in the United States and the tightening of immigration policy along the southern border of that country. The housing crisis led to a sharp decline in construction and other sectors heavily reliant on low-skilled migrant labor (Meissner et al., 2009; Alba, 2024; Restrepo et al., 2019). At the same time, broader economic contraction resulting from job losses affected both local residents and immigrants and reduced remittance flows to Mexico (Hanson, 2009). Another factor that slowed emigration from Mexico was the relative improvement of the Mexican economy during the second decade of the twenty-first century compared to earlier periods (Alba, 2024).

Stricter immigration policy made entry and long-term residence more difficult for migrants (Cornelius, 2005), altering circular migration and labor dynamics in border communities (Alba, 2024). Reduced demand for migrant labor and rising return migration disrupted local economies and reshaped migration patterns within Mexico, especially in border areas. Immigration policy in Mexico has also had important effects on northern border municipalities. The growing presence of migrants in transit and asylum seekers in cities such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Reynosa has placed additional social and economic pressures on these localities (De la Rosa & Antony, 2020).

Regarding population size and growth, the results indicate several notable trends. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the municipality of Reynosa recorded the highest growth rate, at 3.59% annually, followed by Hidalgo County at 3.08%, and the municipality of Tijuana at 2.45% per year. These rates were above the national averages in both countries and point to accelerated demographic expansion in these localities. In Tijuana and Reynosa, growth was closely linked to the expansion and consolidation of maquiladora production, while in Hidalgo it was associated with international trade, services, and agriculture.

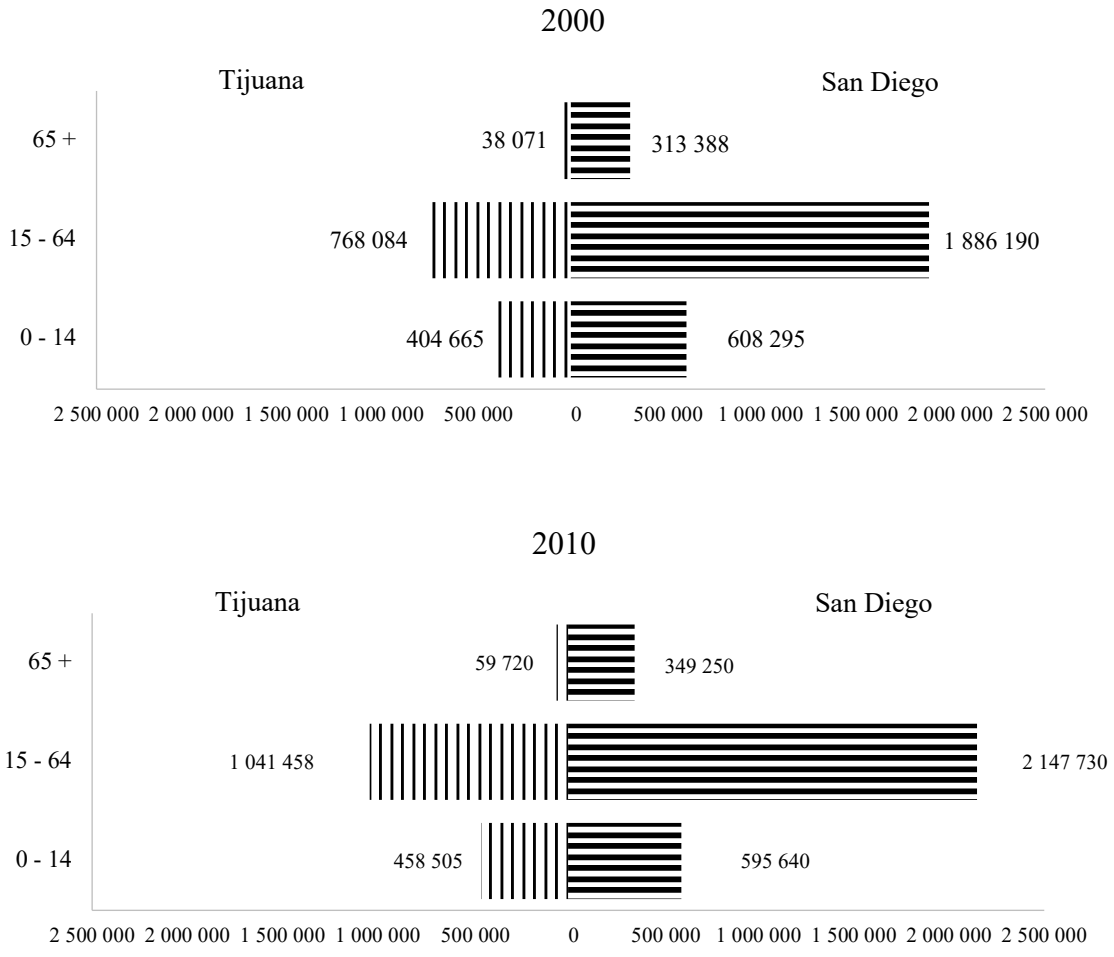
For the 2010–2020 period, Tijuana was the only municipality with a growth rate above 2%. By contrast, U.S. counties experienced much slower growth, with annual rates below 1%. The lowest rate was recorded in Imperial County, at 0.29% per year, while the only exception was Hidalgo County, which registered a growth rate of 1.17% during the decade.

This slowdown in growth during the second half of the study period occurred in the context of a decline in internal migration within Mexico toward the northern border. Migration flows shifted instead to states with stronger economic growth, particularly those linked to the tourism sector, such as Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo. At the same time, changes in immigration policy in the United States contributed to a reduction in the number of people moving toward the northern border of Mexico.

POPULATION CHANGES BY MAJOR AGE GROUPS IN COUNTIES AND MUNICIPALITIES, 2000, 2010, AND 2020

In order to compare differences in population size, this section uses population pyramids by major age groups to examine county-municipality pairs. The analysis highlights contrast not only in overall volume but also in age structure, revealing variation along the border and across each pair during the period under study. Beginning with Tijuana and San Diego, Graph 1 shows that although the population of the former is roughly twice the size of its U.S. counterpart, the age-group pyramids display notable structural differences.

Graph 1. Total Population by Major Age Groups: Tijuana-San Diego, 2000, 2010, & 2020



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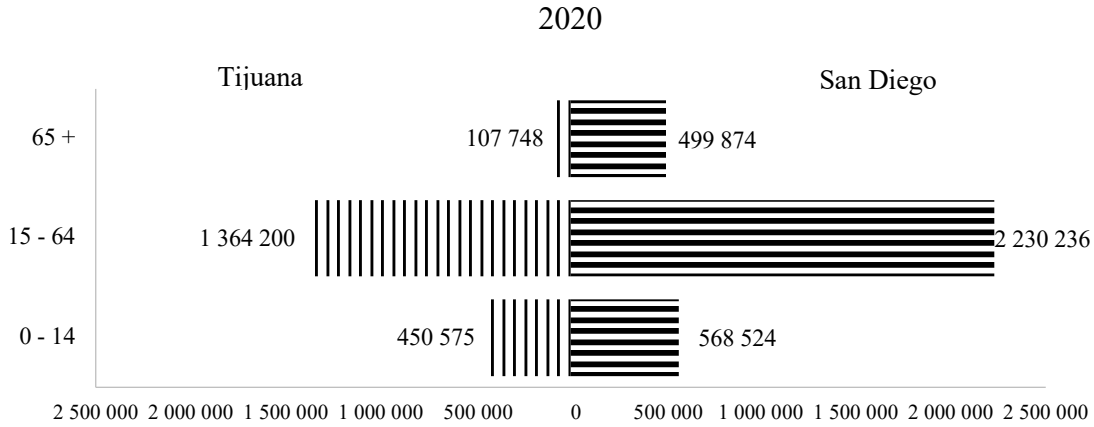


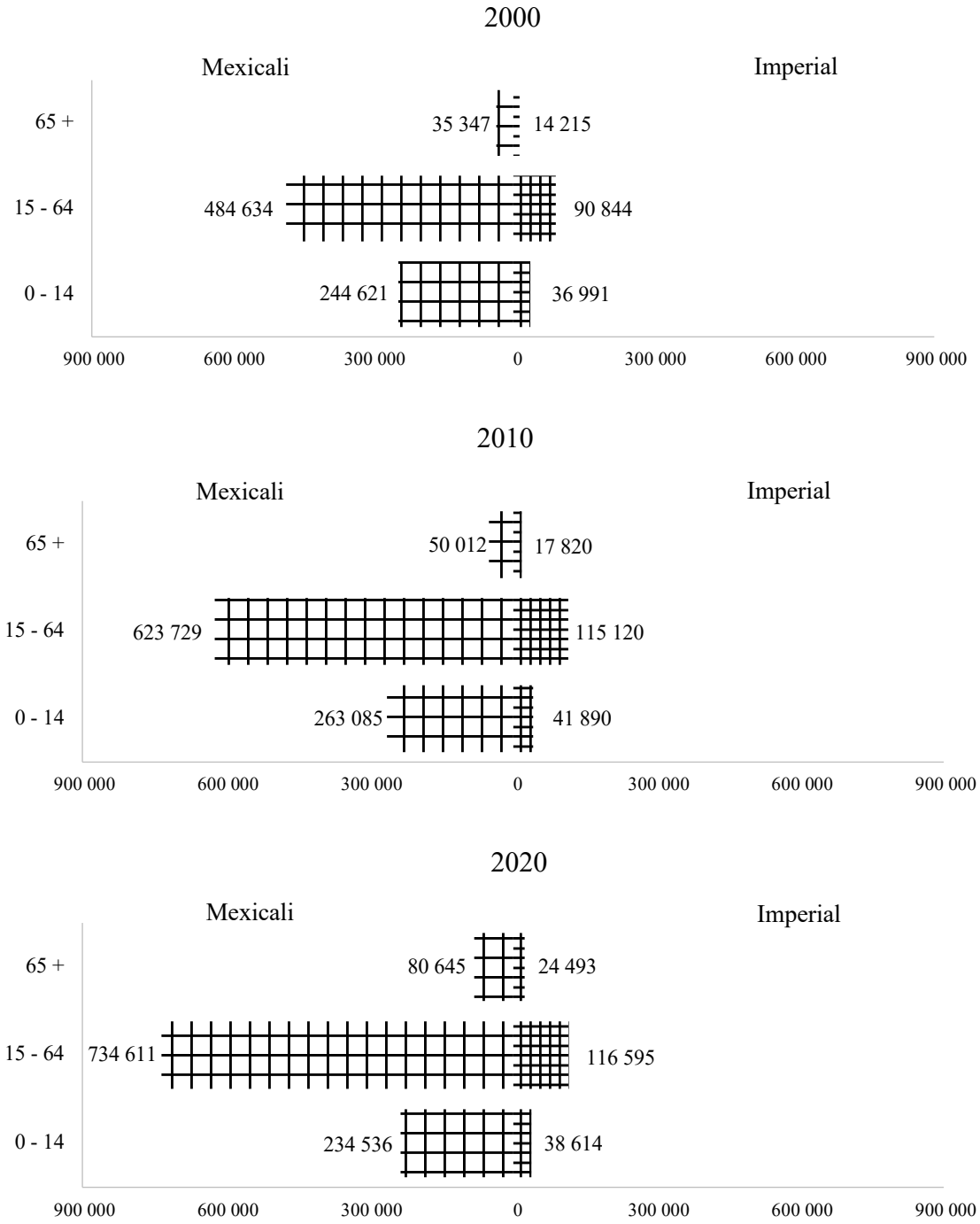
Source: Own elaboration based on data from INEGI (2000, 2010, 2020), Ruggles et al. (2024a, 2024b) and U.S. Census Bureau (2020d).

For the population aged 65 and over, the number in San Diego was eight times that of Tijuana in 2000. In 2010 and 2020, however, the gap narrowed slightly, with the older population in San Diego being about five times larger than in Tijuana. In contrast, for the 15–64 age group, San Diego maintained roughly twice the population of Tijuana throughout the entire period.

The population under age 15 is smaller in Tijuana than in San Diego, although the gap has gradually narrowed. In 2000, the number of children under 15 in Tijuana represented 67% of the total in San Diego; in 2010 the figure rose to 77%, and by 2020 it reached 79%. These shifts reflect, on the one hand, the relatively faster growth of Tijuana and, on the other, the persistence of a comparatively young and expanding population, likely associated with migration and higher fertility levels.

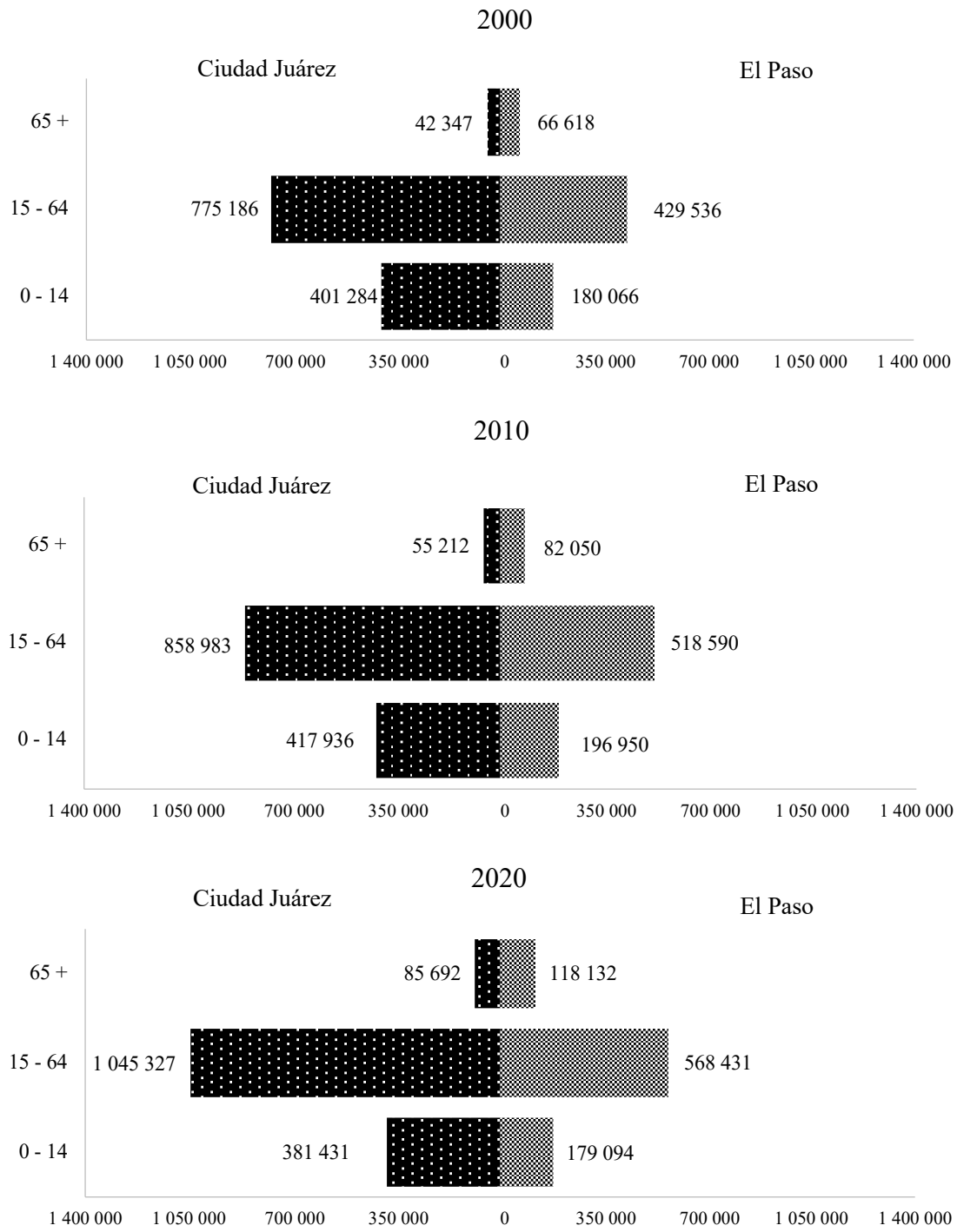
For Mexicali and Imperial, the differences are more pronounced compared to the previous case. As shown in Graph 2, Mexicali exceeds Imperial in all age groups: the population under age 15 is six times larger, the 15–64 group is five times larger, and the population aged 65 and over is three times larger. In the case of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, although the population of Juárez is nearly twice that of its U.S. counterpart in the 0–14 and 15–64 age groups, El Paso has a larger population in the 65 and over category, as illustrated in Graph 3.

Graph 2. Total Population by Major Age Groups:
Mexicali-Imperial, 2000, 2010, & 2020



Source: Own elaboration based on data from INEGI (2000, 2010, 2020), Ruggles et al. (2024a, 2024b) and U.S. Census Bureau (2020d).

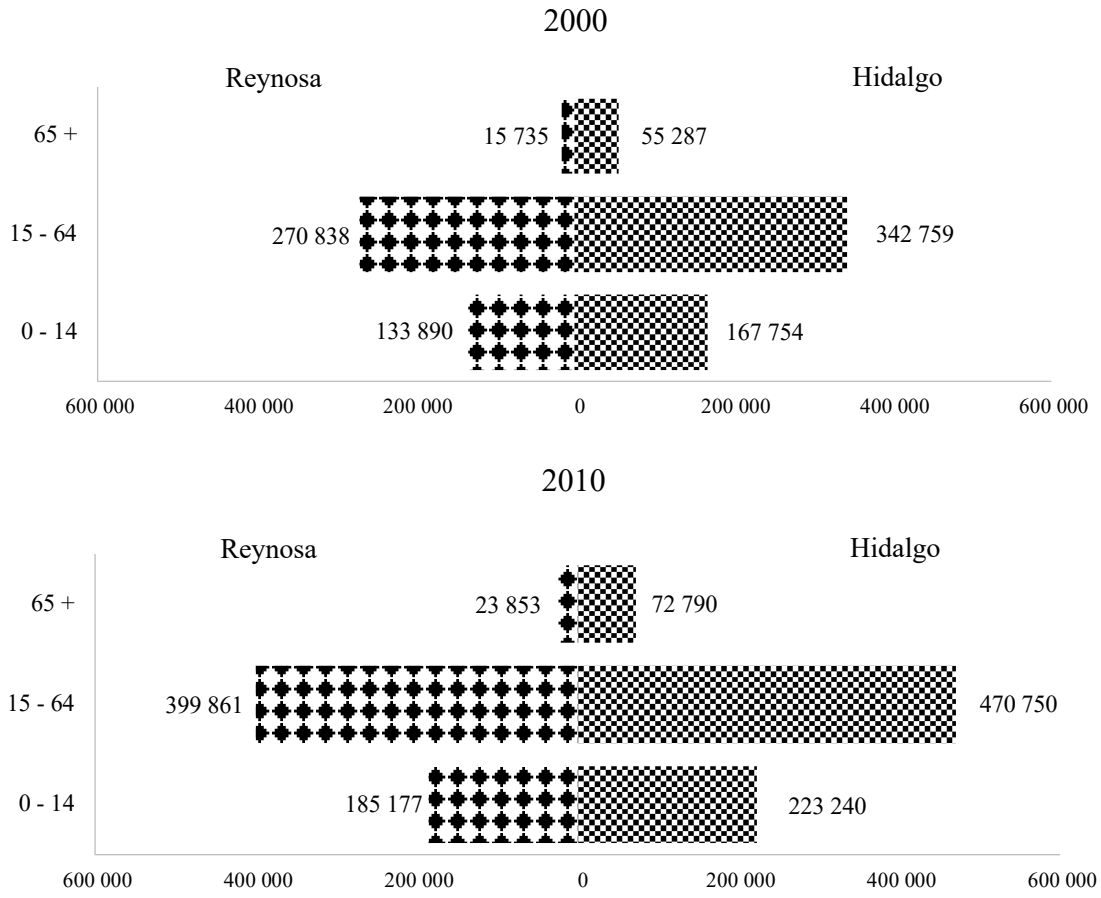
Graph 3. Total Population by Major Age Groups:
Juárez-El Paso, 2000, 2010, & 2020



Source: Own elaboration based on data from INEGI (2000, 2010, 2020), Ruggles et al. (2024a, 2024b) and U.S. Census Bureau (2020d).

In the Reynosa-Hidalgo pair, the U.S. county again shows a larger population across all age groups. As illustrated in Graph 4, the population of Reynosa represented about 80% of that of Hidalgo in the 0–14 and 15–64 age groups in 2000 and 2010; by 2020, the proportion had risen to nearly 90%. This trend points to faster growth in Reynosa and suggests that its total population may soon approach that of the Texas county. In contrast, Hidalgo has roughly three times as many residents aged 65 and over as Reynosa, indicating a more advanced aging profile. Graph 5 shows that Matamoros and Cameron have overall population sizes that are broadly comparable. However, Matamoros has a larger population in the younger (0–14) and working-age (15–64) groups, whereas Cameron has about twice as many residents aged 65 and over.

Graph 4. Total Population by Major Age Groups:
Reynosa-Hidalgo, 2000, 2010, & 2020



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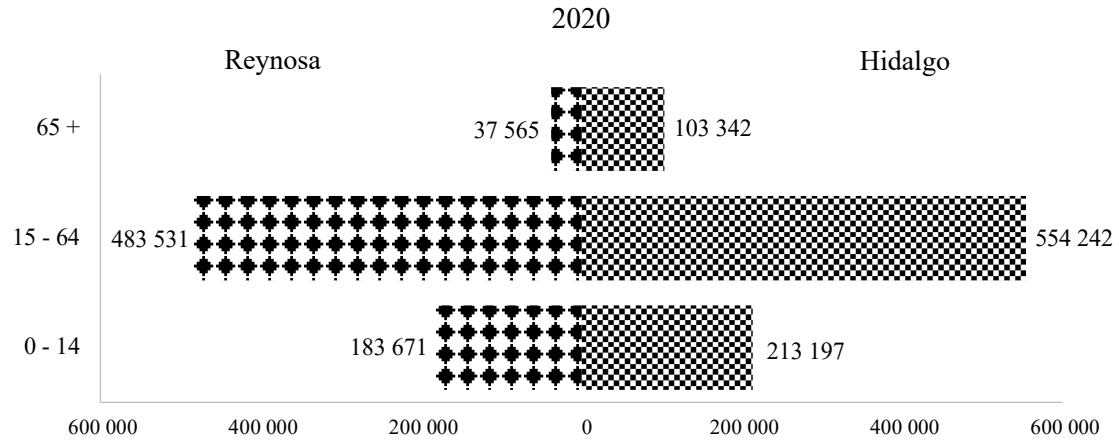
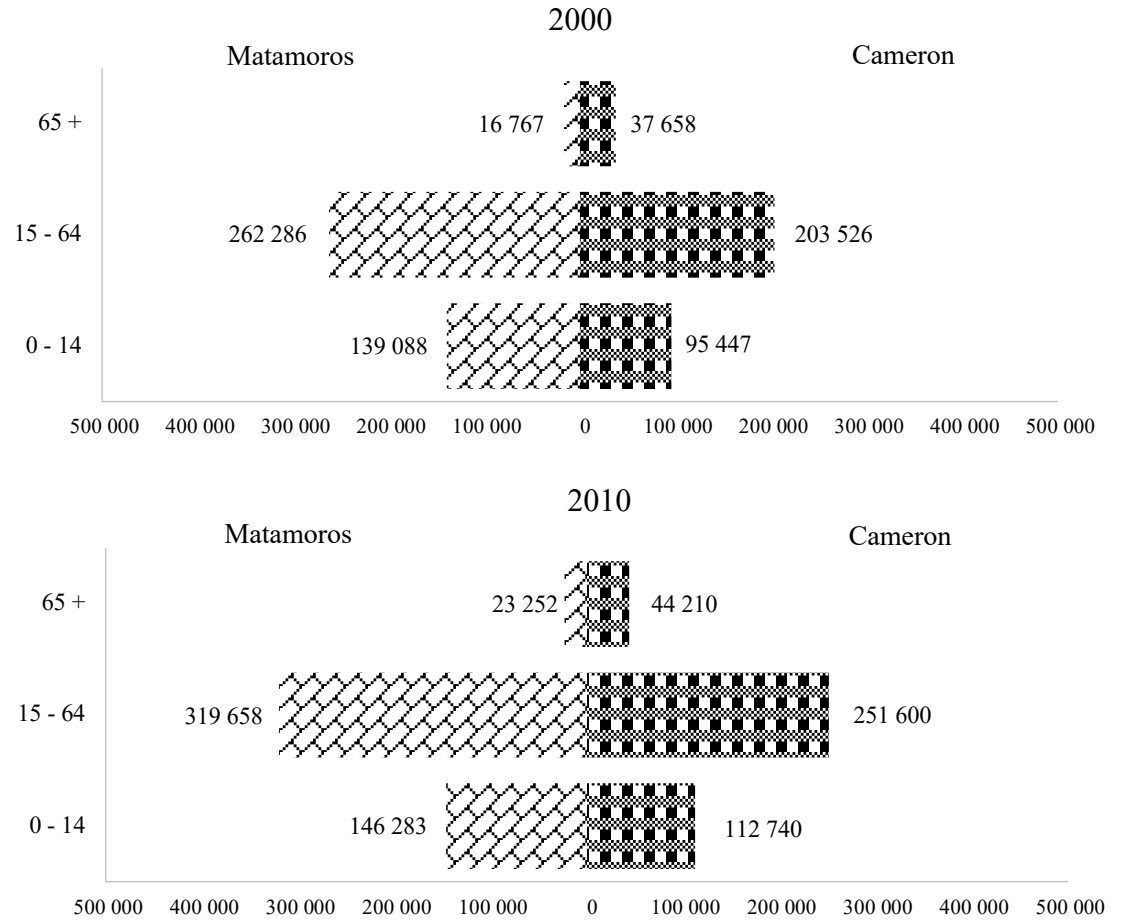


Source: Own elaboration based on data from INEGI (2000, 2010, 2020), Ruggles et al. (2024a, 2024b) and U.S. Census Bureau (2020d).

Graph 5. Total Population by Major Age Groups: Matamoros-Cameron, 2000, 2010, & 2020



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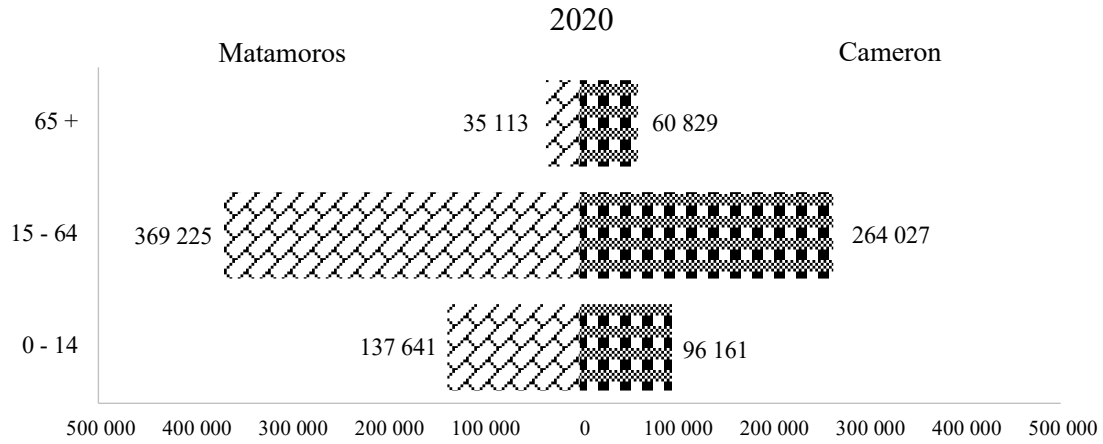

Source: Own elaboration based on data from INEGI (2000, 2010, 2020), Ruggles et al. (2024a, 2024b) and U.S. Census Bureau (2020d).

Differences in population structure between municipalities along the northern border of Mexico—where the population is younger—and counties along the southern border of the United States—where a larger share of residents is concentrated in older age groups—reflect distinct demographic, economic, and social dynamics. A younger age structure is associated with higher fertility rates, greater in-migration at younger ages, and the perception of stronger employment opportunities. In contrast, an older population profile is linked to lower fertility, retirement migration toward the south, and more limited inflows of younger migrants (Negrete Salas, 2009).

Although urban concentration is a common feature across the five selected pairs, each has distinct historical trajectories and characteristics that shape its demographic profile. As a result, certain similarities emerge within each national context. For example, the share of the population aged 65 and over is consistently higher in all U.S. counties—above 12%, reaching up to 15% by 2020—whereas in the Mexican municipalities this group remains smaller, ranging between 5% and 8% in 2020. After comparing population size across each county-municipality pair and highlighting differences by major age groups, the next step is to examine differences in age structure.

Mexico is characterized by a relatively young population structure. In 2000, only 5% of the population was aged 65 and over, a share that rose to 8.2% by 2020. By contrast, beginning in 2000, the aging of the population in United States became increasingly evident. In that year, individuals aged 65 and over accounted for 12.4% of the total population; this proportion increased to 13.1% in 2010 and reached 16.8% in 2020.

With respect to the Mexican states where the municipalities examined in this article are located, the share of the population aged 65 and over differs from the national pattern. In 2000, Baja California recorded 3.8% of its population in this age group, well below the national average, while Tamaulipas stood slightly above it, at 5.1%. This pattern persisted in 2010 and 2020. Baja California remained below the national average, with 4.5% and 6.5%, respectively, whereas

Tamaulipas remained at or above the national level, reaching 6.2% in 2010 and 8.2% in 2020. In the United States, both California and Texas show comparatively lower shares of the population aged 65 and over. In California, this group accounted for 10.6% in 2000, 11.4% in 2010, and 15.2% in 2020. Texas maintained the lowest proportion throughout the period, with 10.0% in 2000, 10.3% in 2010, and 13.4% in 2020.

At the municipal and county levels, differences are even more pronounced than at the state level. Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Reynosa consistently show the lowest shares of the population aged 65 and over across the three reference years. The lowest value is observed in Tijuana in 2000, at 3.2%, while the highest among these municipalities appears in Ciudad Juárez in 2020, at 5.7%. Mexicali records the highest proportion of older adults, exceeding the average for Baja California, with 4.6% in 2000, 5.3% in 2010, and 7.7% in 2020. Although Matamoros also shows relatively elevated shares—4.0% in 2000, 4.8% in 2010, and 6.5% in 2020—the proportion remains below that observed in Tamaulipas overall.

At the county level, San Diego and Cameron stand out for having the highest shares of residents aged 65 and older. In San Diego, older adults accounted for 11.2% of the population in 2000, 11.3% in 2010, and 15.2% in 2020. Cameron followed a similar trajectory, with 11.1% in 2000, 10.8% in 2010, and 14.4% in 2020. In both cases, these figures surpassed statewide averages in California and Texas for the same years, reinforcing the broader national shift toward an aging population. By contrast, Imperial, El Paso, and Hidalgo display proportions of residents aged 65 and over that closely mirror those of their respective states throughout the period analyzed.

When comparing age structures across county-municipality pairs, the share of the population aged 0–14 shows a consistent decline on both sides of the border. The drop is especially pronounced between 2010 and 2020 in Tijuana, Mexicali, and Ciudad Juárez, each registering a six-percentage-point decrease over the decade. In Reynosa and Matamoros, the reduction was more moderate, at roughly four percentage points during the same period. On the U.S. side, declines across counties have generally been more gradual, averaging between one and two percentage points, with the notable exception of Cameron County, where the share of children aged 0–14 fell by four percentage points between 2010 and 2020. Overall, the shrinking weight of this age group reflects broader demographic aging processes, driven by sustained declines in fertility and rising life expectancy.

Similarly, the Reynosa/Hidalgo and Matamoros/Cameron pairs reported very similar shares of the population aged 0–14 in 2000, 2010, and 2020. This resemblance was already evident in the population pyramids presented in Graphs 4 and 5, which depict communities closely aligned in both size and growth dynamics. Their shared historical and migratory ties help explain these parallel demographic patterns. Table 2 further illustrates how the long-standing relationship between Mexico and the United States has translated into a growing proportion of residents of Mexican origin living in counties across the southern United States.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution by Broad Age Groups.
Selected Municipalities and Counties, 2000, 2010, & 2020

Municipality/ County	*2000*			*2010*			*2020*		
	0 to 14	*15 to 64*	*65+*	*0 to 14*	*15 to 64*	*65+*	*0 to 14*	*15 to 64*	*65+*
Mexico	34.1	60.9	5	29.3	64.4	6.3	25.3	66.5	8.2
United States	21.4	66.2	12.4	19.8	67.1	13.1	18.2	65	16.8
Baja California	33.2	63	3.8	28.9	66.6	4.5	23.4	70.1	6.5
California	23	66.4	10.6	20.5	68.1	11.4	18.1	66.7	15.2
Tijuana	33.4	63.4	3.2	29.4	66.8	3.8	23.4	71	5.6
San Diego	21.7	67.1	11.2	19.3	69.4	11.3	17.2	67.6	15.2
Mexicali	32	63.4	4.6	28.1	66.6	5.3	22.3	70	7.7
Imperial	25.9	64	10.1	24	65.8	10.2	21.5	64.9	13.6
Chihuahua	33.3	62	4.7	29.7	64.4	5.9	25.2	67.3	7.5
Texas	23.5	66.5	10	22.9	66.8	10.3	20.6	66	13.4
Ciudad Juárez	32.9	63.6	3.5	31.4	64.5	4.1	25.2	69.1	5.7
El Paso	26.6	63.5	9.9	24.7	65	10.3	20.7	65.7	13.6
Tamaulipas	31.6	63.3	5.1	28.5	65.3	6.2	24.7	67.1	8.2
Texas	23.5	66.5	10	22.8	66.9	10.3	20.6	66	13.4
Reynosa	31.8	64.4	3.8	30.4	65.7	3.9	26.1	68.6	5.3
Hidalgo	29.6	60.6	9.8	29.1	61.4	9.5	24.5	63.6	11.9
Matamoros	33.3	62.7	4	29.9	65.3	4.8	25.4	68.1	6.5
Cameron	28.4	60.5	11.1	27.6	61.6	10.8	22.8	62.7	14.4

Source: Own elaboration based on data from INEGI (2000, 2010, 2020), Ruggles et al. (2024a, 2024b) and U.S. Census Bureau (2020d).

The population of Mexican origin has expanded steadily in the United States overall and across the border states that include the five counties examined in California and Texas, as well as within the counties themselves. By 2020, approximately 35.8 million individuals of Mexican origin resided in the United States, accounting for about 58% of the Hispanic population according to census data. California has led the country in the size of its Hispanic population since 2014, and by 2022 Latinos represented roughly 40% of the state's total population. Texas ranks second in Latino population size, with its highest proportional share recorded in 2021 (Krogstad et al. 2023).

To provide a more precise profile of the population of Mexican origin in the border counties, Table 3 presents the proportional distribution of the categories that make up the resident population in the U.S. counties under study. These are grouped into "Non-Hispanic" (including White, African American, and Asian populations), "Hispanic" (comprising individuals of Latin American and Caribbean origin as well as those of Spanish origin), and "Mexican origin" (defined as all individuals who self-identify as such in the census, regardless of whether they were born in Mexico or in the United States).

Table 3. Proportion of non-Hispanics, Hispanics or Latinos, and Mexicans, 2000, 2010, & 2020

	Non-Hispanics			*Hispanics or Latinos*			*Mexican origin (of total population)*		
County	*2000*	*2010*	*2020*	*2000*	*2010*	*2020*	*2000*	*2010*	*2020*
United States	*87.5*	*83.6*	*81.3*	*12.5*	*16.4*	*18.7*	*7.4*	*10.3*	*10.8*
California	67.7	62.4	60.6	32.3	37.6	39.4	25.3	30.6	30.9
San Diego	73.5	67.8	66.1	26.5	32.2	33.9	22.3	28.1	28.6
Imperial	27.4	19.8	14.8	72.6	80.2	85.2	66.9	77.1	79.9
Texas	68.1	62.4	60.7	31.9	37.6	39.3	24.7	31.6	31
El Paso	22	18.1	17.4	78	81.9	82.6	67.1	76.4	75.7
Hidalgo	11.9	10.1	8.1	88.1	89.9	91.9	77	84.6	84
Cameron	15.5	12.2	10.5	84.5	87.8	89.5	69.8	80.4	80.7

Source: Own elaboration based on data from Ruggles et al. (2024a, 2024b) and U.S. Census Bureau (2020b, 2020c).

Table 3 highlights changes between 2000, 2010, and 2020 in the share of the population identifying as Hispanic or Latino and as being of Mexican origin in the United States, in the selected counties, and in the two states where they are located, California and Texas. The most notable trend is the sustained increase in the proportion of Hispanics or Latinos over time, both at the state and county levels. In California and Texas, the Hispanic share rose from 32% in 2000 to 39% in 2020. The counties, however, display a markedly different pattern. With the exception of San Diego, whose percentage falls even below the state average for California, the remaining selected counties along the southern border report substantially higher shares. In 2000, Imperial already recorded 72.6%, and by 2020 Hidalgo reached a peak of 91.9%.

With respect to the share of the population of Mexican origin within the total population of the United States, a pattern similar to that observed for Hispanics emerges. At the national level, the proportion of residents of Mexican origin increased from 7.4% in 2000 to 10.8% in 2020. In Hidalgo, the share rose from 77% to 84% over the same period. San Diego registers the lowest proportion of residents of Mexican origin among the selected counties, with 28.6% in 2020. This figure falls below the state average for California, which stood at 30.9% that year, and contrasts sharply with Imperial, also in California, where 79.9% of the population identified as being of Mexican origin.

These patterns suggest that one factor underlying the similarity in population structures between Reynosa and Hidalgo, as well as between Matamoros and Cameron, is that they largely reflect the same population base, sharing comparable demographic behaviors across the border. By contrast, the pronounced differences in the population structures of Tijuana and San Diego may be associated with the internal composition of the latter, where the proportion of residents of Mexican origin is substantially lower, even below the average observed in California.

CLOSING REMARKS

The Mexico-U.S. border remains a complex space to analyze, where population dynamics are central to understanding future development in the region. A defining feature of this border is the predominance of cities and urban corridors, which shape everyday life around commercial, transportation, service, health care, educational, and labor market infrastructures characteristic of urban settings. This configuration generates sustained cross-border mobility, as people move in both directions to meet every day needs—education, employment, trade, tourism, and health care services, the latter increasingly sought by visitors from the United States in Mexico.

A comparison of selected municipalities along the Mexican border indicates that, in all cases, perceptions of improved quality of life persist, largely associated with employment opportunities in the maquiladora industry and the service sector (Alba, 2024). At the same time, marked differences emerge in the sectoral orientation of these local economies between the eastern and western stretches of the border. Cities such as Ciudad Juárez, Reynosa, and Matamoros are more closely linked to manufacturing, logistics, and freight transportation, whereas Tijuana shows a stronger orientation toward tourism and cross-border passenger flows. Mexicali, by contrast, is distinguished by the prominence of agricultural development, as well as by the integration of this sector with its counterpart across the border in Imperial, a dynamic that sets it apart from the other municipalities under consideration.

The slowdown in population growth along the Mexico-U.S. border between 2010 and 2020 reflects a combination of demographic, political, and social factors. The 2007–2009 economic crisis in the United States had prolonged effects on the national economy, including elevated unemployment rates and a slow recovery, which reduced the relative attractiveness of migration to that destination. In addition, the intensification of migration control policies and the expansion of border enforcement measures made cross-border mobility more difficult, while rising deportation levels contributed to perceptions of an increasingly hostile environment.

The population of Mexican origin has grown both in the United States as a whole and in the border states that include the five selected counties, California and Texas, as well as in the counties under study. Over time, its relative demographic weight has increased, with a rising proportional presence from Imperial to Cameron. Hidalgo registers the highest percentage of residents of Mexican origin, whereas San Diego shows the lowest proportion within its total population.

In conclusion, examining and describing demographic dynamics is essential given the political and economic implications for the region. Migration directly shapes population trends in both Mexico and the United States, with observable effects on growth rates and age structures as reflected in population pyramids. It also provides a framework for identifying longer-term trends, while the data generated contribute valuable evidence for planning services and allocating public resources.

Translation: Evelyne Rosales.

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