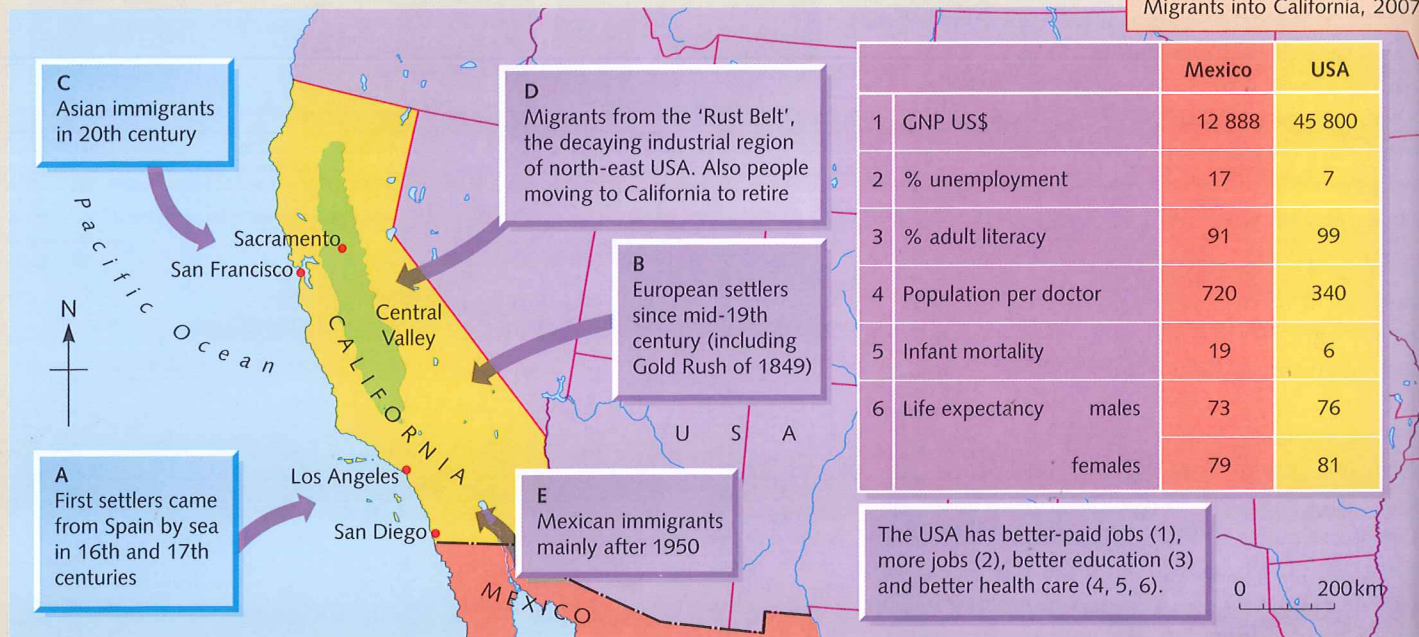


Immigrants into California



California was, until the mid-nineteenth century, sparsely populated mainly by Native Americans. The first migrants did not arrive in any large numbers until the mid-nineteenth century (Figure 2.22). Since then, successive waves have helped increase the resident population to 32 million:

- **Nineteenth century:** from Western Europe – external, voluntary, permanent (Figure 2.1).
- **Early twentieth century:**
 - eastern and southern Europe
 - eastern Asia
 both external, mainly voluntary/ some forced, permanent.
- **1930s:** American Mid-west (the 'Dust Bowl') – internal, partly forced, permanent.
- **Since 1950:**
 - north and east of the USA – internal, voluntary, permanent
 - eastern Asia – external, voluntary and forced, permanent
 - Mexicans (Hispanics) – external, voluntary, initially seasonal/ increasingly permanent.

Mexican workers

Hispanics are people from Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. In recent years, many Hispanics have migrated northwards to form the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the USA. Compared with its rich northern neighbour, Mexico has a relatively low standard of living, insufficient jobs and poorer education and health provision. As a result many Mexicans, especially those living in villages and

working on the land (Figure 2.23), migrate into the USA, although often on a temporary basis. At one time only the men migrated, returning when they had earned enough money. Now they often stay permanently, sometimes taking their families with them (some villages in Mexico have lost half their population), sometimes deserting their family.

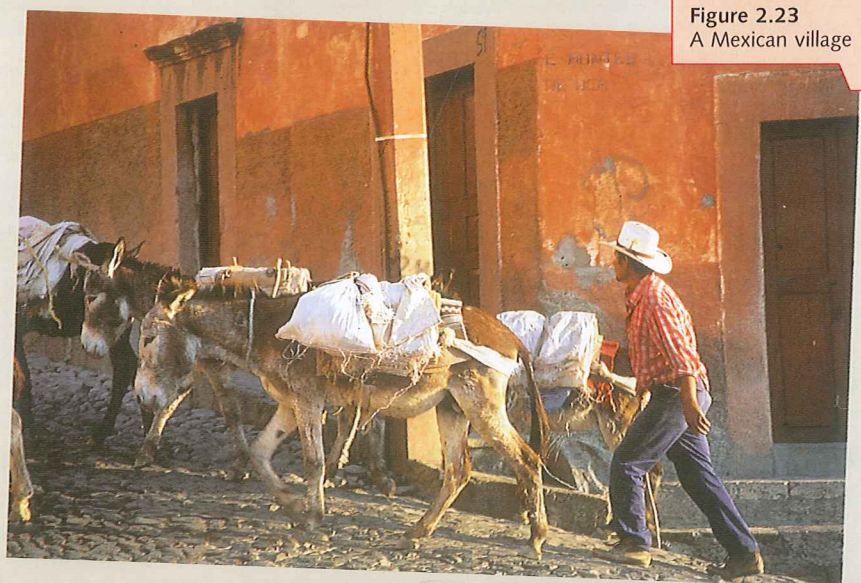


Figure 2.23
A Mexican village

Migrants – illegal and legal

Estimates suggest that between 1 and 2 million Mexicans try each year to cross into the USA, many illegally. Although the USA has set up elaborate border security controls using horses, helicopters and other advanced detective equipment, it is possible that nearly a million migrants manage to slip through each year. As one border guard claimed, 'We catch somebody one night, return him to Mexico the next day, for him to try again that night and the next, until he is finally successful'. The number of migrants who arrive legally with their 'Green Card' issued by the Department of Immigration, rises and falls with the seasonal availability of jobs.

Jobs taken by migrant workers

Although Mexican workers are viewed as a drain on America's social security and welfare system, they are essential to the nation's economy. The migrants take the harder, dirtier, seasonal, more monotonous, more dangerous, less skilled and less well-paid jobs. For example:

- Large numbers find seasonal work on large agricultural estates, mainly in California's Central Valley, at harvest times (Figure 2.24). Despite the low pay by American standards, some migrants can earn more during three or four months in the USA than in a full year back in Mexico.
- Many others obtain employment in large urban areas, mainly Los Angeles, either in the construction industry or in hotels and restaurants.

Mexicans in Los Angeles

Many Mexicans perceive Los Angeles as the 'City of Opportunity'. The reality is very different (Figure 2.25).

Most of the immigrants are young, have little money and few qualifications. Unless they have a Green Card, they cannot work legally and are forced to take very low-paid jobs, often in the informal sector (page 148). Some have to move around to avoid detection while others find language a problem when seeking

a permanent job. Many of those who do get jobs find their income is insufficient to obtain decent accommodation and are forced to live in ghettos in the poorest districts. In one such district, that of Compton, Hispanics make up nearly three-quarters of the total population (Figure 2.26).

Figure 2.24
Mexican migrant workers packing vegetables in California

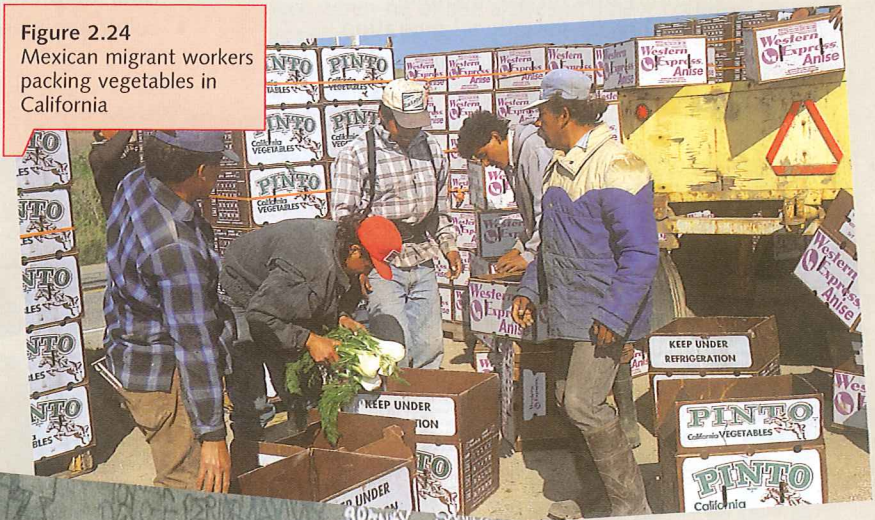


Figure 2.25
Poor-quality Hispanic housing in Compton, Los Angeles

Figure 2.26
Rapid increase in the Hispanic population of Los Angeles and the district of Compton

