How do two of these numbers relate to one another?

In 2000, there were an estimated 4,680,000 unauthorized and 9,177,485 authorized Mexican immigrants living in the United States.¹

Before proceeding to a discussion of the significance of these two numbers, and of their relation to one another, a few considerations must be pointed out. Both are based on samples and thus are not absolute fact; as discussed in the previous paper, the estimation of unauthorized immigrants is particularly sensitive. However, both figures were statistically tested and are understood to be generally accurate. It should also be noted that “Mexican” means “born in Mexico;” therefore, these numbers do not represent all immigrants coming from Mexico (as many natives of other Central and South American countries enter via the U.S.-Mexico border), but only Mexican citizens. It is also important to remember that these numbers refer to Mexicans, not Hispanics; the persons included in these estimates may or may not consider themselves Hispanic, and there are many Hispanics in the United States that are not Mexican. Finally, the number of authorized Mexican immigrants can be presumed to include persons who initially entered illegally and later were able to legalize their status following the immigration reforms of 1986.

There are almost twice as many legal Mexican immigrants as illegal (the ratio is about 1.96:1); put another way, about a third of people born in Mexico and currently living in the United States are here illegally. When one considers the history of immigration between the U.S. and Mexico, this proportion makes sense. First of all, the routes and patterns of migration between the two countries have been in place and continually evolving for over one hundred years, since 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo annexed Mexican territory, and the Mexicans living in it, to the United States. When this happened, many Mexicans automatically became U.S. citizens while retaining cultural and social ties to Mexico. In the years after that, U.S. dependence on (and importation of) Mexican labor solidified migration networks that persist to this day. Because of their importance to U.S. labor needs, these networks were not formally regulated or restricted like other immigrant flows until the immigration reform of 1965. At that point, immigration quotas far below the extant migration pattern were established; the pattern, however, did not change, thus creating an unauthorized population. In 1986 there was another immigration reform, which included not only amnesty provisions but significantly stricter border control. As a result of this, many previously unauthorized immigrants obtained legal status. However, the increase in border policing did not hinder the flow of new unauthorized immigrants; instead, it just required them to cross over much more dangerous land in order to travel between the two countries. This had the unforeseen effect of “sealing” illegal immigrants in the U.S. and eventually leading to more settled, rather than circulatory, migration patterns. People were just as likely to try to cross the border after 1986 (perhaps even more likely, since there was a network of newly-legal friends and relatives to assist them), but less likely to want to attempt such a journey more than once. Since that time, this settlement-oriented pattern of unauthorized immigration has continued. In the 1990s, after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the flow of unauthorized immigrants spiked; millions of Mexicans were

¹ The previous paper discussed the number of unauthorized Mexican immigrants estimated to be living in the United States as of January 2006 (about 6,570,000). Because the most recent data for the number of authorized Mexican immigrants comes from the 2000 Census, this paper uses the 2000 estimate of unauthorized Mexican immigrants (which are lower than the 2006 figure) in order to make as valid a comparison as possible between these two numbers.

displaced from their land and jobs because of the economic changes brought about by NAFTA. The current volume of unauthorized Mexican immigration has decreased from the 1990s levels, but remains steady.³

The figures above thus reflect a long-standing historical pattern: migration to the U.S. from Mexico has persisted regardless of changes in legislation and enforcement, and illegal immigration is not likely to cease unless U.S. policy takes the strength of this pattern into serious consideration. This means creating policies aimed at altering the momentum of the pattern itself, instead of just trying to curtail forces that are already well-set in motion. Such policies could include making legal immigration a more feasible option, by increasing quotas, decreasing prohibitive costs, and streamlining the bureaucratic process. Another possibility would be to lessen the impetus to emigrate from Mexico at all. This would require not only restructuring U.S. agribusiness and manufacturing to reduce the market demand for undocumented labor, but also would require bi-national efforts to improve the Mexican economy so that immigration to the U.S. is not the only option for economic survival for so many Mexican citizens.