

## As U.S. struggles with migration, Mexicans see it as inevitable part of life

Mark Stevenson  
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### ATOTONILCO, Mexico

— They name their babies Johnny and Leslie, so certain are they that their kids' future lies in the United States.

Returning migrants sprinkle English into their speech as they talk knowingly about job markets in U.S. towns.

America may want to stop illegal immigration, but most Mexicans accept it as a fact of life they can't imagine changing.

Mexico's economy, society and political system are built around the assumption that migration and amnesties for undocumented migrants will continue — and that the \$20 billion they send home every year will keep coming, and almost certainly grow.

In fact, the government is counting on continued cash from a Mexican-born U.S. population it predicts will rise from 11 million to between 17.9 million and 20.4 million by 2030.

"There have been amnesties and reforms before, and they will continue to occur periodically," said Jesus Cervantes, director of statistics for Mexico's Central Bank.

President Vicente Fox is one of many Mexican who considers the migrants "heroes," because they send money to their impoverished home villages, and in some cases risk death walking into America in pitiless desert sun.

Many families give their babies "American" names, figuring it will help them fit in when they make the inevitable trip north. In



Marco Ugarte / The Associated Press

Farmers Jose Contreras Perez, right, and Emiliano Hernandez pause during work on a field in Atotonilco, Mexico, on Tuesday. While the United States wrestles painfully for a solution to undocumented immigration, Mexican officials simply say they plan to keep sending their citizens north — and win periodic U.S. amnesties for them.

one central Mexican village, men on a dusty side road knowingly discuss which Long Island towns are best for day-labor work.

Cervantes avoids using the common metaphor of migration as an escape valve for Mexico's social tensions, but says the country of 105 million people would be in trouble if 11 million migrants returned en

masse.

On the ground, the lure of America is evident. Abelardo Gonzalez, an elementary school director in the southern state of Oaxaca, said of his students: "From the time they are little kids, they have this idea of going north."

So many people have left the farming town of Atotonilco in central

Tlaxcala state, 480 miles from the U.S. border, that a sort of U.S. job placement network has grown up. Migrants send word home of a vacancy for a gardener in Los Angeles, a carpenter in Houston or a dishwasher in Raleigh, N.C.

"A lot of people who leave already have jobs lined up," said Daniel Escalona Garcia, who sells building materials

— largely for homes being built for absent migrants.

When those homes will be inhabited is another question. Many remain half-built, or are finished but empty. It's common to see a well-built, two-story home being used to store hay. Skilled construction workers are scarce because most are in the United States.

"All of the good houses

belong to people who have emigrated," said Jose Contreras, whose five children live in the United States. Some of his grandkids were even given American names before they left.

"They named one kid Johnny instead of Juan," the 79-year-old farmer said with a hint of disgust. "They thought it was a good idea."

In the past, only adult men would go, said Escalona Garcia, "but now it's entire families, and boys as young as 14 or 15."

Few in Mexico question the prevailing feeling that Mexicans have an inalienable right to go north, documented or not.

A proposal in the Mexican Senate last year that would have kept migrants away from particularly dangerous border crossings when temperatures soared was denounced as doing the United States' "dirty work." It was withdrawn.

Agustin Escobar, an immigration scholar at Mexico's Center for Research on Social Anthropology, is a maverick.

He questions whether migration is good for Mexico, given that on average a migrant puts less money into the economy than a Mexican who stays here.

But he doesn't get much of a hearing.

"There is a great deal of resistance on the part of the government to even consider analysis of these issues," Escobar said.

"The policy of not interfering with the flow of migrants has always been the easiest route."

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