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Migrants send less money back to Mexico

The U.S. economic downturn and beefed-up border control have meant hard times for many Mexicans who depend on remittances from the north.

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TEJARO, MEXICO — The U.S. economic downturn and tightened border controls have begun to alter the rhythms of undocumented migrants who used to move back and forth with regularity, which has crimped the flow of money sent home to Mexico, one of the nation's main sources of foreign income.

The developments have produced worry and deep uncertainty in towns such as Tejaro, a farming community of 4,200 where pickup trucks bear license plates from Nevada and Minnesota. Virtually every family here has sent relatives across the border, usually illegally and often to the same few U.S. destinations.

The number of residents from this part of central Michoacan state who are making the trip this year is about half the usual rate of 8,000, said Juan Felipe Ruiz Lopez, a former undocumented worker in Georgia who now oversees migrant issues for the municipality that includes Tejaro.

"In another year, we could be at the end of the era of illegal migration because of all the fear," Ruiz said.

Many Michoacan residents continue to head north in search of work, and migration experts say any slowdown would probably end once the U.S. economy recovered. But migrants have been quick to adapt to the shifting conditions, such as staying put on the U.S. side to avoid the new rigors of reentering illegally after coming home to Mexico.

Spring is when many Mexican migrants head north in hopes of beating the intense desert heat along the border for summertime jobs in construction, landscaping and farming. But the U.S. housing downturn has dried up much of the building-related labor market, and a striking number of workers here say that, for now, they are unwilling to accept the physical and legal risks and fast-rising smugglers' fees to reach an iffy job situation on the U.S. side.

"It is just too hard to get there," said Jose Chavez Oliveros, 32, who returned home last year after working in an aluminum factory in Nevada for \$8 an hour.

Sweating as he shoveled manure in a cow shed here the other day, Chavez said he had no plans to try his luck again, though his \$15-a-day wage as a farmhand is a pittance compared with his U.S. pay.

He recalled having to hike with five others across the desert in Arizona to evade U.S. Border Patrol agents after waiting all day by the roadside for a smuggler, who charged the migrants \$1,300 apiece. Some people here cited fees as high as \$4,000.

"Compared with dying in the desert, it's better to stay here," Chavez said.

A drop in money transfers, or remittances, from migrants abroad has forced families here to further tighten their belts and choked businesses that rely on wages earned in the United States.

Eleazar Chavez Ayala said sales at his family's hardware store in Tejaro had fallen by half because so few residents were buying sink fixtures and other supplies for home improvement, often the trophy for months spent working in the U.S.

"There is a lot of worry and very little work," said Chavez, 31.

Michoacan is especially vulnerable because it depends more heavily on migrants' remittances than any other state in Mexico. The estimated \$24 billion sent to Mexico last year was barely higher than in 2006, a sobering deceleration just a few years after growth had galloped. The news was even worse in Michoacan, where transfers fell in each quarter from 2006, ending down 6.4% overall, according to the Bank of Mexico.

Rita Perez, 54, said it's been six months since she received money from any of her four sons in Reno, all gardeners. None has steady work now.

Previously, the sons rode out down times or slow winter months by taking jobs in fast-food restaurants, she said. But this year there were none.

Perez, who had been used to getting \$200 to \$300 every two weeks, now relies on her daughter, who has three children of her own and a job in a Tejaro store that pays \$30 week.

"Sometimes we can't afford beans," Perez said.

On the edge of a tree-shaded plaza in nearby Tarimbaro, the municipal seat, the town's lone money exchange has seen transfers drop to about \$800 daily from \$7,000, said co-owner Maria de los Angeles Duarte.

She said those still sending money do so less often, every two weeks instead of weekly.

Residents and analysts say the drop shows the precarious situation of migrants in the United States. Many are holding on to their wages as a hedge, while others have given up and gone home.

Donald F. Terry, a senior official at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, said about 1 million fewer Mexican families are now receiving remittances, increasing the risk of poverty.

"You could have an increase in poverty in Mexico, and it could be significant if the numbers accelerate," Terry said.

A deepening cash shortage could push reluctant migrants to hit the road again, said Jorge Smeke, who heads the business administration program at Iberoamerican University in Mexico City.

"People could decide, 'I have to go,'" Smeke said. "A drop in remittances could produce a greater flow of migrants, or a greater flow to the cities" in Mexico.

Many Michoacan migrants have continued trying to cross, drawn by wages that would be unheard of in rural Mexico.

Juan Carlos Hernandez made \$10 an hour as a landscaper in Reno, but when his work ran out he returned to Tejaro. On a recent day, though, he was making plans to go back, though two brothers and a nephew in Reno lack jobs.

"If you don't have work here, you have to go somewhere. It's the reality of Mexico," said Hernandez, 38, wearing a blue baseball cap and the cocksure demeanor of a man who has sneaked past border agents four times. "We have to go because here we can't survive."

U.S. immigration officials say falling arrests and remittances are evidence that many undocumented migrants have been dissuaded by the stricter measures, which include hundreds more border agents, new fences and, in selected areas, criminal prosecution of those caught crossing.

Arrests on the border fell to 876,704 during the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, a 20% decline from the previous year. This year, they are on pace to be lower still, by about 16%.

Some argue that the sagging economy is probably a bigger factor in the drop-off. They say smugglers continue to get migrants past the beefed-up border defenses by using false documents or traveling by sea.

Wayne Cornelius, an immigration expert at UC San Diego, predicted that border arrests and money transfers would bounce back to earlier levels once the U.S. economy recovered. That's what happened when border arrests fell during the 2001-02 economic downturn, he said.

A U.S. recovery would comfort Tejaro's residents, who speak of places like Reno and Santa Ana with the familiarity of neighbors. Until then, they are facing the unhappy flip side of their town's long relationship with the U.S. economy.

"If there is no work *there*," said Perez, whose sons have stopped sending money from Reno, "then what can we do *here*?"

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