

Not all Mexican migrants are poor laborers

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MEXICO CITY - Juan Manuel Guillermo was a year away from a law degree. Then his son got sick. The 9-month-old needed expensive intestinal surgery, so instead of finishing school, Guillermo headed north in hopes of joining his brother toiling in the sun-scorched fruit fields of Santa Ana, Calif.

"I wanted to get settled as a professional and be with my family ... I never in my life thought I would go," Guillermo, 22, said recently from the border city of Tijuana after his fourth unsuccessful attempt to cross into the United States.

While many Americans associate Mexican immigration with poor, rural laborers, a large number of those seeking work in the United States these days are better-educated and hail from relatively well-to-do, middle-class backgrounds in the city.

Many set aside years of training and education to illegally clean houses, take seasonal landscaping jobs or accept positions at meatpacking plants - all of which pay better than most white-collar work in their homeland.

Many obtain visas to work, study or join family members already there. Hundreds of thousands do not.

"Before, we saw only rural people with little education," said Efrain Jimenez, vice president of a Los Angeles group serving migrants from the northern Mexican state of Zacatecas.

"Now we see young professionals or those who, after years of working (in Mexico), haven't been able to save up much money and look for other options."

That was the case for Jose Alvaro Lopez, whose three years of trade school and degree in appliance repair got him a job that paid only \$100 a week in his native Ensenada, 45 miles south of the California border.

The 30-year-old, interviewed at a migrant shelter in Tijuana, said he would try to sneak into the United States and join friends in Nevada.

"They told me that in Las Vegas I could earn \$35 an hour repairing refrigerators," he said.

It's hard to find any Mexican family - rich or poor - that doesn't have relatives or friends in the United States.

Even Felipe Calderon, the former energy secretary who leads the latest polls as the presidential candidate of the ruling, pro-business National Action Party, often mentions on the campaign trail that he has a cousin and brother-in-law there. He has refused to name them or divulge their legal status.

Life for many Mexican professionals changes drastically when they cross the border. Some of the doctors, dentists and nurses who migrate see patients in their apartments because they don't have the necessary certification or visa to work in hospitals or clinics.

Of the estimated 10.6 million Mexicans - both legal and undocumented - who live in the United States, nearly 700,000, or about one in 15, have college degrees, said Rodolfo Tuiran, President Vicente Fox's deputy secretary of social development until last year.

He said migrants from major metropolitan areas, including the country's three largest, Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey, are heading north at rates faster than their counterparts from many rural regions.

A report published in April by Georgetown University and a Mexican government think tank found that Mexican migrants in the United States on the whole are slightly better educated than the average Mexican, who stays in school only through the eighth grade.

"Their social and personal characteristics - including education - help them cope with the risks and costs of international mobility," the study said.

Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California at San Diego, said middle-class families began heading north in droves after the peso collapses in 1982 and 1994 wiped out many people's life savings.

Cornelius said Mexico's falling birth rate would eventually drive wages up in Mexico and help reduce migration but that it would be decades - if not generations - before any real impact is felt.

"The problem is getting worse," he said. "And that's not going to change for a long time."