

Mexicans Miss Money From Relatives Up North

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Correction Appended

EL RODEO, [Mexico](#) — For years, millions of Mexican migrants working in the United States have sent money back home to villages like this one, money that allows families to pay medical bills and school fees, build houses and buy clothes or, if they save enough, maybe start a tiny business.

But after years of strong increases, the amount of migrant money flowing to Mexico has stagnated. From 2000 to 2006, remittances grew to nearly \$24 billion a year from \$6.6 billion, rising more than 20 percent some years. In 2007, the increase so far has been less than 2 percent.

Migrants and migration experts say a flagging American economy and an enforcement campaign against illegal workers in the United States have persuaded some migrants not to try to cross the border illegally to look for work. Others have decided to return to Mexico. And many of those who are staying in the United States are sending less money home.

In the rest of the world, remittances are rising, up as much as 10 percent a year, according to Donald F. Terry of the Inter-American Development Bank. Last year, migrant workers worldwide sent more than \$300 billion to developing countries — almost twice the amount of foreign direct investment.

But in Mexico, families are feeling squeezed.

Estrella Rivera, a slight 27-year-old in this stone-paved village in Guanajuato state in central Mexico, was hoping to use the money her husband, Alonso, sent back from working illegally in Texas to build a small clothing shop at the edge of her garden.

But a month ago, Mr. Rivera returned home. His hours at a Dallas window-screen factory were cut and rumors spread that he would inevitably have to produce a valid Social Security number. Now, he works odd jobs or tends cornfields. Mrs. Rivera's shop is indefinitely delayed, a pile of bricks stacked on the grass.

Like Mr. Rivera, some of the men who went to work in the United States illegally have returned discouraged. And less work means less money to send home — particularly from the southern United States and other areas where Mexican migrants are a more recent presence.

“One out of three people in these new states who was sending a year ago is not sending it home today,” Mr. Terry of the Inter-American Development Bank said. “There are some 500,000 families who aren’t receiving this year.”

Until last year, the American housing trades absorbed hundreds of thousands of migrants, and the hardships of the trip north seemed to pale beside the near certainty of finding work.

Now, the construction slump — along with a year-old crackdown on illegal [immigration](#) at the border and in the workplace, and mounting anti-immigrant sentiment in places — has made it even harder for Mexican migrants to reach the United States and land well-paying jobs.

Many experts say it is too early to know if the negligible increase in remittances will continue. Some argue it was to be expected: much of the initial spike in money transfers had resulted from better accounting. In addition, earlier waves of migrants are returning to the houses they built, or they have managed to legalize their status in the United States and bring their families, sending less money back.

But the events of the last year in the United States, political and economic, have also clouded the prospects of many illegal Mexican workers. New walls, new guards and new equipment at the border have dissuaded many from trying to cross and raised the cost for those who try to as much as \$2,800. Workplace raids and stories of summary deportations stoke fears among Mexicans on both sides of the border.

Referring to tougher measures in the United States, Primitivo Rodríguez, a Mexican immigration expert, said: “Psychologically, they lead you to save money in case of an emergency. You send less, you save more.”

The shakier economy in many states means that migrants have moved from well-paying steady jobs to work as day laborers.

“In our interviews with families, they say that migrants are now working two or three days when before they worked four or five days,” said David Skerritt, a historian at Veracruzana University.

Rodolfo García Zamora , an immigration expert at the University of Zacatecas, said money transfers to Zacatecas state fell by about 25 percent this year.

Here in Guanajuato state, remittances have created a peculiar economy in villages tucked among rolling corn and sorghum fields. There are few jobs, yet many houses have stereo systems, washing machines and three-piece living room sets.

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Things are changing, though. Some of the men are back and need cash for seeds and fertilizer to plow long-neglected fields. At the microcredit association operated by a local nonprofit group, the Bajío Women's Network, loans for agriculture, which barely existed last year, now account for 11 percent of all borrowing.

Women are finding it harder to save, said Evelyn Siquin, the network coordinator. "The people who have come back can't work, and the people in the United States are working fewer hours."

Other than agriculture, the jobs here are in construction, building houses of absentee owners' houses along the cobbled streets. Some are modest with a few brick rooms; others are ornate tributes to their absentee owners' success: gold-painted balconies, the Virgin of Guadalupe etched in a window, Greek columns. Los Emigrantes carpentry shop in nearby La Cueva sits on a traffic circle adorned with a monument showing several figures, one of them a migrant waving a fistful of dollars.

Not much else flourishes. Three months ago, Mónica Núñez closed her tortilla shop in the village of San Lucas. "Most people went to the United States and sales went down," she said.

Her husband has been home from Houston for a year, but she has seven brothers and a sister in the United States who still send money. She is planning a new business, perhaps an Internet cafe so people can connect with relatives in the United States.

Less than an hour's drive away, the city of Querétaro is prospering, turning out home appliances for the world market. But for most people in the villages, education ended after elementary school. An unskilled factory or construction job pays little more than \$50 or \$60 a week.

With those prospects, the next generation — some of them as young as 15 — seemed to have few doubts about heading to the United States.

Estrella Rivera's brother Francisco left for the first time when he was 16. Now 21, he recently came home after a year and a half in Orlando, Fla., working in construction. He earned enough to add a floor to his parents' house, but then he struggled.

"Either there was no work or they did not want to hire somebody without papers," he said, perched on an old Ford pickup truck with Michigan tags beside his family's sheep and cow pens.

But he expects to go back again. "To tell the truth, it really is worth the trouble," he said, recounting a terrifying crossing getting lost in the Arizona desert.

Mrs. Rivera's husband is not so sure. "It's really tough to go back," he said. "Now they lock you up. Before, they grabbed you and sent you back. The laws were never this tough."