

A risky trip? Officials say fewer Central Americans immigrating

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Broke and hungry, several Central Americans begged for food and impatiently scanned oncoming traffic from their perch on a dusty roundabout in Reynosa, waiting for a truck that might pick them up for a day's work.

The morning smell of roasting taco meat that wafted from a nearby block taunted the already hungry illegal immigrants as they recounted the odyssey from their home countries that left them penniless and stranded.

The 30 or so immigrants had left home to seek work in the United States, but after paying off police and gang members on their trip through the Mexican countryside, they were unable to afford a *coyote*, or human smuggler, to lead them across the Rio Grande.

"I didn't know that this was the journey that would happen to me," said 30-year-old Honduran Jovoni Veneda.

The obstacles mounting, and his dreams put aside, he just wanted to make a little cash and then return to Honduras.

Jovoni's journey stopped just miles away from the U.S. border, but few Central Americans are even trying to get that far anymore.

Facing increased enforcement along both the U.S. and Mexican southern borders and finding work closer to home, fewer are making the trek across the Mexican desert, according to statistics provided by U.S. Customs and Border Patrol.

While it is impossible to measure how many people actually cross illegally, the agency uses the number of apprehensions to estimate the ebb and flow of immigration traffic. In 2007 the number of Central Americans detained in the Rio Grande Valley fell by nearly 50 percent - a trend consistent throughout the U.S. border region.

Government officials on both sides of the border are quick to credit better enforcement and increased deportations for the decline.

Other immigration experts cite the destruction of a railway line that carried immigrants from Mexico's southern border north and a strong Costa Rican economy as pivotal factors that have persuaded many to stay in their home countries or emigrate elsewhere.

Still, the decline in apprehensions perplexes most officials and immigration watchers. Experts are unsure why the number of apprehensions has dropped, said Manual Orozco, a senior researcher at the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University. Apprehensions may not be the best indicator of immigration numbers, he said.

"You still see the pattern of migration has not stopped," Orozco said. "People continue to travel."

And it is important to note that while people from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala top the list of illegal immigrants detained by Border Patrol in the Rio Grande Valley, Census data suggests that their contribution to illegal immigrant traffic is a small fraction of the number coming across.

The largest numbers of immigrants, illegal and legal, are still from Mexico, according to an analysis of Census data provided by the Pew Hispanic Center.

TREACHEROUS JOURNEY

For many Central American immigrants the trek north starts with a more-than-120-mile hike from the Guatemalan border to the Mexican town of Arriaga - one of the closest points to the border to hop a northbound train. Before 2005, immigrants rode the Chiapas-Mayab railway from the border. But in 2005, Hurricane Stan - a relatively weak storm that was accompanied by several other strong rain systems - destroyed the route, which has not been repaired. The following years, there was a steady decline in the number of Central Americans apprehended by Mexican authorities.

In the Mexican state Chiapas in 2007, the number fell by close to 40 percent, said Rafael Retelen Ponuchoulan, a representative of the Instituto Nacional de Migración - the agency responsible for controlling migration within Mexico.

The chance of being detained by Mexican authorities has also increased. Since President Felipe Calderón took office two years ago, Mexico has sent more federal police and immigration officials along the train routes and the border, said Retelen.

Even if immigrants avoid Mexican authorities, they still have to contend with the criminals.

After surviving the train route, 20-year-old Honduran immigrant Bryan Smith said he was kidnapped by members of the Zetas, the paramilitary wing of the Tamaulipas-based Gulf Cartel.

He said he was released after his captors called his mother and realized the family had no money to pay the ransom.

CAUGHT AND DEPORTED

A year after the hurricane destroyed the railway, U.S. authorities also instituted a policy they believe has curbed Central American immigration.

Unlike Mexican immigrants - who, if not repeat offenders or wanted criminals - are given the opportunity to return to Mexico before they are processed, Central Americans are always processed by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Since they are already in Mexico illegally and can't cross the border at an official crossing, most will enter the United States illegally with the aid of a *coyote*.

Before 2006, Central Americans who were detained were given an order to appear in court and then released - known as catch and release. Few of them actually appeared. But in 2006 the agency began the expedited removal program that sends illegal immigrants back to their home country on average more than two weeks after they're caught.

"When we stopped doing (the catch and release program) you could actually see the numbers drop dramatically," said Dan Doty a local spokesman for the Border Patrol. "There was no longer an incentive for them to come here. It wasn't worth their time to travel all that way to get caught and sent back."

With the expedited removal program, more people are processed at a quicker rate, said Mark J. Moore, ICE's director of detention.

"The reality is you can detain more folks if you're more efficient in the removal process," Moore said. "(We) critically shortened the length of stay in the traditional hearing process."

OTHER OPTIONS

With odds stacked against immigrants successfully avoiding detention and reaching the United States, officials believe that many are now seeking work in a country closer to home: Costa Rica.

A growing tourism industry and soaring produce prices are creating labor work for immigrants in Costa Rica, which is in the midst of an economic boom.

In 2006, the Costa Rican economy grew 7.9 percent, and in 2007 continued with an estimated 6.5 percent expansion, according to the U.S. State Department. That growth has outpaced most Central American countries and continued to increase the standard of living, already high for the region.

"You'll find a lot of Nicaraguans, for example, are immigrating to places like Costa Rica and El Salvador," said Blake Schmidt, a journalist who covers politics and immigration for the *Nica Times*, an English-language newspaper in Nicaragua. "There are no border patrol officials and nonsense to cross into Costa Rica." The Hondurans on the street corner in Reynosa said Hondurans are not welcome in Costa Rica, but they expect they can find work in the United States.