

Wealthy Mexicans Fleeing Drug Violence Find a New Home in San Antonio

The city's newest immigrants from the south aren't low-wage workers but business leaders looking to invest.

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SAN ANTONIO—On a recent Tuesday morning, a group of businessmen and women met at The Club at Sonterra, a San Antonio country club, for breakfast and a presentation on Europe's economic troubles. Some attendees paid close attention, while others checked their phones or asked their neighbors to pass the salsa. Not so surprising, except that the presentation was in Spanish and was directed to an audience of Mexican investors.

The national debate over immigration tends to focus on low-wage laborers, and overlooks individuals like the members of Asociación de Empresarios Mexicanos, wealthy businessmen and women who have moved to the United States with capital and the desire to invest it. "What you're seeing is that we're exporting a great number of professionals, educated people. We're not only exporting agricultural workers," says Hermann Warnholtz, 57, an AEM member. "That's good for the U.S.—that is not good for Mexico. We're exporting knowledge, talent, and we're also exporting capital."

In Mexico City, Warnholtz was a business consultant who helped North American companies enter the Mexican market. After moving to San Antonio last year, he's hoping to do the reverse: advise American businesses interested in expanding into Mexico.

San Antonians like Warnholtz illustrate the connection between South Texas and Northern Mexico: It's about the flow of money, goods, and people, in every way you can imagine. Although 63 percent of San Antonians are Hispanic, many are second- or third-generation Americans. If the city can be said to be experiencing a current wave of immigration from Mexico, that wave is made up of families who would fit right in AEM. Widespread drug-cartel violence in Mexico has led many of the country's business elite to move north.

San Antonio has long served as something of a bridge between the two countries. "It's sort of a mirror image of Monterrey, which has always looked north. San Antonio has historically looked south," says economics professor Richard Butler of Trinity University.

This one city exports more products and services to Mexico than 42 other American states combined, according to the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. Toyota chose to manufacture its Tundra pickup trucks in the area partly because it was interested in selling to and receiving supplies from northern Mexico. Mayor Julian Castro may be the only U.S. mayor who not only leads trade delegations to Mexico but whose delegations meet with the Mexican president.

Moving to San Antonio was a simple choice for Warnholtz—he has family in the area and has vacationed here. San Antonio is also an obvious choice for businessmen and women who want to move to the U.S. but also want to retain their ties to businesses in Mexico. The city is about 150 miles from the border and is connected to Mexico by road, rail, and direct flights.

With its majority Hispanic population, San Antonio is often described as a city that previews what the U.S. will look like in the future. This AEM breakfast was attended by a diverse crowd: there were lily-white Caucasians, Asian-Americans, and even an African-American attendee. But everyone spoke Spanish.

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