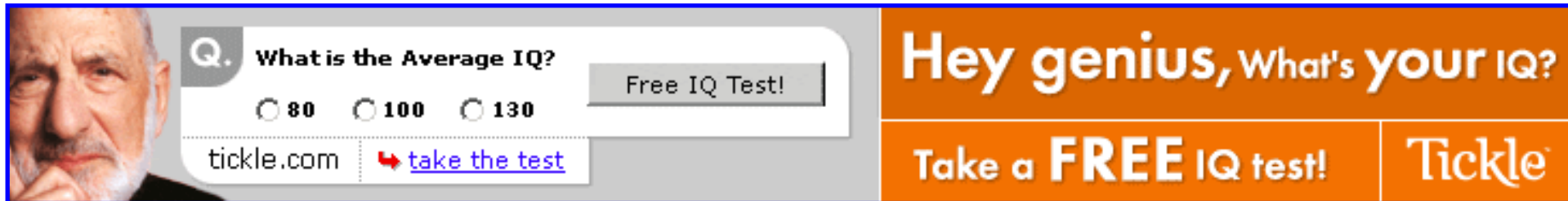


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Mexicans at Home Abroad

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By [EDUARDO PORTER](#) and [ELISABETH MALKIN](#)

Published: August 4, 2005

In recent decades, millions of working-age Mexicans have entered the United States. Most of them have come illegally, taking jobs on the bottom rungs of the American labor market.

While much of the attention remains on the persistent inflow of illegal workers, a new question is beginning to worry some analysts and policy makers on both sides of the border: What will happen when the 10 million Mexicans living in the United States become too old to work? Will they retire in the United States or will they return to Mexico?

As they age, the choices these old-timers make could fray the social fabric on both sides of the border.

Mexico is not prepared to receive them back. With a rapidly aging population living in Mexico and virtually no public system of social security or health insurance, Mexico could hardly cope with millions of returning immigrants who spent their working lives in the United States.

"If we add to the dynamic of aging the return of Mexicans who don't have coverage," said Rodolfo Tuirán, a respected demographer who is under secretary of social development in the Mexican government, "then we are talking about a significant problem."

But the United States is also unprepared to deal with millions of poor, aging immigrants, eking out a living without recourse to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid or most other forms of federal assistance.

In 2003, an estimated 710,000 Mexicans over 60 lived in the United States, 63 percent more than a decade earlier, the National Population Council of Mexico concluded, based on Census Bureau figures. About a quarter lived under the poverty line, a far greater share than the 10 percent of the overall elderly population who are poor.

Those numbers are expected to swell for the current generation of illegal immigrants. Unlike earlier migrants - many of them now legal residents in the United States - today's illegal immigrants are likely to see Social Security, Medicare or Medicaid as little more than mirages. While most have paid taxes over their working lives to these programs, under current law they are not entitled to any benefits.

"If all these people that came here are going to stay, then there is a question of what will be the social cost," said Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington. "If they're only here for their working life, it's a bargain."

Immigration policy, however, might be unwittingly contributing to an increase in the number of older Mexicans staying in the United States, as increasingly tight border controls encourage illegal immigrants to settle here rather than risk keeping families in Mexico and shuttling back and forth across the border.

Consider Angelita Sánchez de Valdez, who stepped into a rickety boat to cross the Rio Grande more than half a century ago, entering the United States illegally to join her husband and start a new life as a migrant farm worker. Today, Ms. Sánchez, an 83-year-old widow, is an American citizen and Mexico, she said, "is a little bit forgotten."

Living with her daughter and son-in-law in Donna, Tex., a parched town 10 miles from the border, Ms. Sánchez receives \$453 a month from Social Security

plus \$81 in Supplemental Security Income, intended to improve the incomes of the poor. With no private insurance and no savings, she relies on her daughter's good will, and on Medicaid to pay for prescription drugs and medical bills not covered by Medicare.

Given the nature of the movements across the border, there are no definitive statistics on return flows of older migrants to Mexico. But as the number of older immigrants starts adding up, 35 years after the flow of illegal workers across the border started to swell, the trickle of returning old-timers is gathering momentum.

An official survey of Mexican residents in 1990 found only 11,500 over 50 who had been living in the United States in 1985. By 2000, the number of Mexicans older than 50 who had been in the United States five years earlier rose to 27,900, according to the National Population Council.

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Eduardo Porter reported from Donna, Tex., and Guerrero, Mexico, for this article. Elisabeth Malkin reported from Mexico City and Jalisco, Mexico.

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Mexicans at Home Abroad

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One draw pulling Mexicans back home is affordability. "In little Mexico the money seems like a lot," said Roselino Sebastián Castañeda, 72, who returned

nine years ago to his hometown in Tierra Caliente, Guerrero, after 35 years shuttling from California to Texas to Louisiana to Colorado to Montana.

He knows he could never afford to live in the United States on the \$350 a month he collects from Social Security, the half of his benefit not swallowed by child support for a daughter in Arizona. But in Mexico, he said, "if I stop drinking and stop partying I can live on that."

Another draw is property. Almost half of Mexican immigrants over 50 own property in Mexico, according to a survey by the Pew Hispanic Center. The decision can come down simply to the nebulous yet powerful tug of nostalgia.

Family ties are perhaps the most powerful forces. But they can pull either way: the probability of return is much higher for the 58 percent of immigrants over 50 who left spouses back in Mexico than for the 24 percent who have spouses in the United States, according to data from the Mexican Migration Project, a survey series run by researchers at Princeton University and the Universidad de Guadalajara in Mexico.

Ms. Sánchez stayed in the United States because she could not bear to leave her children and grandchildren. "In the beginning I really tried to convince my old man to return," she said. "But I got used to it. Now I've got to stay here because all my family is here."

Mr. Sebastián Castañeda, on the other hand, returned to Mexico to care for his mother, who is now 96. "That's why I don't go back" to the United States, he said.

Francisco Franco Álvarez spent 30 years in California making bricks, landscaping and tending Los Angeles's sewers. He left his wife, Silvina Barba Tejeda, behind at their home in Valle de Guadalupe, Jalisco, a small rural town in western Mexico. But he returned every winter on what his daughters Silvina and María Adela joke was the annual visit to conceive. There were 16 pregnancies, 4 miscarriages and 12 children.

But 22 years ago, at age 62, he decided it was time to return home. "An old man alone is like an old dog all alone," he said.

The 10 surviving children were long gone from the nest: 4 in Mexico and 6 in the United States. He and his wife could live on \$500 a month from Social Security, plus \$381 from a union pension. They owned a house, partially built with money he sent back every month from his jobs in the United States.

And Mr. Franco, now 84, had had enough of America. "The pace of life there bothered me a lot," Mr. Franco said from his perch at the threshold of an old stable and inn, where he holds court with a group of elderly men. "Over there it's a country of slaves."

He took a swig from a mix of arnica and tequila, apparently a balm for sore throats. "Here you can live for years," he said. "If I lived there I would have died."

Sitting next to Mr. Franco, Máximo Álvarez Gutiérrez, 65, sees things from the opposite perspective. He also left for the United States 45 years ago. He picked peaches in Fresno and bused tables in Los Angeles. He sent money home every month for his wife, and bought a four-bedroom house on a cobbled

street.

But rather than returning to live in Mexico, Mr. Álvarez brought his wife, María, to the United States six years ago. They now live in a room above the garage at the home of one of their daughters in Bellflower, Calif., southeast of downtown Los Angeles. And their house in Valle de Guadalupe lies empty for much of the year.

"I've always liked living in the United States," said Mr. Álvarez, who is applying to become an American citizen. "I've been there for 45 years. It's a whole life."

Most illegal immigrants in the United States have yet to reach the age in which it becomes all but impossible to lug another sack of cement across construction sites or race up and down a ladder picking peaches from a tree. When they do, their choices are likely to be different from those of the current crop of elderly.

For starters, unlike most old-timers today, they will probably remain illegal. In the 1960's and 1970's, becoming a legal immigrant was relatively simple: having a child in the United States was often all it took.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 allowed another 2.3 million illegal immigrants from Mexico to become legal American residents, eligible for benefits like Social Security.

But the situation is no longer so easy. In the last 10 years, crossing the border has become much more difficult as immigration restrictions have been tightened. These days, even if an illegal immigrant were entitled to obtain legal residence - say, through an adult citizen son or daughter - the immigrant would be barred officially from the United States for 10 years before being allowed to live here legally.

At the same time, the continuous fortification of the southern border might have the unintended consequence of encouraging aging immigrants to stay. Douglas Massey, a professor of sociology at Princeton University who heads the Mexican Migration Project, says that tougher border controls are changing the nature of illegal immigration.

Unwilling to face the border patrol and the desert crossing more often than is absolutely necessary, illegal immigrants are returning home less than they used to. Instead, they are bringing their wives and children to the United States, becoming more settled in their new land.

"Before, immigration was largely male," Mr. Massey said. "The vast majority would return to Mexico and they often left their families on the Mexican side of border. The militarization of the border transformed a single male migration into a family migration. That makes retirement to Mexico much more problematic."

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