# *Immigration has grown more complicated; Even if conditions met, wait to get in can take decades*

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## Body

When Yudi went to the U.S. consulate in San Pedro Sula in Honduras to see whether she could ***get*** into the USA, the receptionist ticked off the documents she would need to apply for a visitor's visa.

She would need to show whether she had a bank account and how much was in it, whether she owned real estate or a car and that she had a good-paying job for at least five years -- all evidence that might indicate she was not trying to ***get*** into America to stay and work illegally. Her heart sank.

"I realized it was impossible," she said, speaking on the ***condition*** that her full name not be used because she said she was assaulted by smugglers. "I would never have those things."

So Yudi, 23, did what millions of other Latin Americans have done. She came anyway.

Many people in Latin America have requested legal visas to come to the USA, but the ***wait*** ***can*** be ***decades***, if approval is given at all. Diversity visa programs aimed at increasing the USA's cultural mix are skewed against Latin America because there are so many of its people already here. All of which provides a powerful inducement to sneak in, critics of the U.S. ***immigration*** system say.

U.S. visa laws have changed and become so much ***more*** complex since the days of Ellis Island that it is simply impossible for many hardworking people around the world to legally ***immigrate*** to the USA, they say.

"It's not a system that is at all geared to reality," said Nic Suriel, an ***immigration*** lawyer in Phoenix.

***Immigration***-control advocates say the system is doing its job and the true problem is that the USA cannot afford to ***take*** in ***more*** people.

"America is already at an unsustainable level of hyperlegal ***immigration***," said William Gheen, president of the Americans for Legal ***Immigration*** Political Action Committee. "Anybody that's complaining about us not letting enough people in legally is full of it."

Until the 1920s, ***immigrating*** to the USA was relatively easy. America needed people to populate its Western frontier and work in its factories.

In 1921, Congress passed the first law setting numerical limits for visas based on countries of origin.

As the USA moved toward a service-oriented economy in the 1960s, ***immigration*** officials became ***more*** selective about the kinds of workers the nation wanted.

Immigration has grown more complicated; Even if conditions met, wait to get in can take decades

These days, U.S. immigrant visas are limited mostly to the educated, the affluent or people who have spouses or parents in the USA, said Gustavo Garcia, an ***immigration*** lawyer in Mexico City. If the ancestors of most Americans had tried to ***immigrate*** to the USA under today's rules, their American Dream would have ended before it began, Garcia said.

"These days, you need a visa before you ***can*** ***even*** embark on a trip to the United States," Garcia said. "They couldn't have ***even*** ***gotten*** on the boat."

Under today's rules, most immigrants must be sponsored by a family member or by an employer, who must prove to the U.S. government that the immigrant has skills that are in short supply.

***Even*** for those who meet the requirements for a visa, ***getting*** approval to ***immigrate*** to the USA ***can*** ***take*** 20 years or ***more***, compared with the three to five hours it ***took*** immigrants to pass through Ellis Island during the peak of European ***immigration*** from 1900 to 1914.

Back then, there was no national ***immigration*** law setting quotas: People could enter as long as they were healthy and had no criminal record. General ***immigration*** laws limiting total numbers of ***immigration*** were passed in the 1920s.

Today, U.S. citizens trying to bring a spouse or young child to the USA ***can*** ***get*** visas for them almost immediately, said Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and ***Immigration*** Services. Other people face a longer ***wait***.

U.S. citizens trying to bring an adult, Mexican-born son or daughter to the USA face an 18-year ***wait*** before a visa becomes available, according to the U.S. State Department's monthly visa report. For a U.S. citizen trying to help a Filipino sibling ***immigrate***, the ***wait*** is 19 years.

Bentley said the system works well, noting that about 1 million people legally ***immigrate*** each year and the biggest backlogs are for a handful of countries that have historically sent large numbers of people, mainly Mexico, India, South Korea, China and the Philippines.

"To say that we don't have a robust legal ***immigration*** system in the United States would be erroneous," Bentley said.

So how does an unskilled worker from Mexico, with no job offer and no family in the USA ***get*** to legally ***immigrate*** there?

He ***can***'t, said Mike Franquinha, a Phoenix ***immigration*** lawyer.

"There's no vehicle for these people to ***immigrate***. It just doesn't exist," he said.

From March 2007 to March 2009, about 300,000 people either entered the USA illegally or overstayed temporary visas, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, a non-partisan think tank based in Washington. Half of them were Mexicans.

In all, there were about 11.1 million illegal immigrants in the USA in 2009. That's one of every four foreign-born people in the country.

In recent years, lawmakers and ***immigration*** experts have proposed several changes to reduce the illegal population, including:

*Making ***more*** visas available for Latin America and nearby countries. The shortage of visas and the resulting 18- to 25-year ***wait*** prompt many people to enter the USA illegally, Garcia said.

*Reinstating Section 245(i), a provision in the ***immigration*** law that expired in 2001. It allowed spouses and children in the country illegally to stay while awaiting an immigrant visa and after paying a fine.

*Passing the Dream Act, which would allow children brought to the USA illegally by their parents to achieve permanent residency if they attend college or serve in the military.

The bill, first introduced in 2001, was part of the Defense Authorization Act the Senate shelved last week.

***Immigration***-control activists say people will continue to try to enter the USA illegally, no matter how easy it is to ***get*** a visa.

"You're never going to have enough legal ***immigration*** slots for everybody who wants to come here," said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Washington-based Federation for American ***Immigration*** Reform.

The real troublemakers, said ALIPAC's Gheen, are employers who hire illegal immigrants, politicians who praise their contributions and authorities who make them feel welcome by, for example, offering forms and services in Spanish.

"If you follow the (***immigration***) rules, you're penalized; if you break the rules, you're rewarded," Gheen said.

To speed up the visa process, U.S. officials should limit family-based immigrant visas to spouses and children only, Mehlman said.

Cracking down on illegal immigrants and their employers would open up jobs for U.S. citizens and legal immigrants. Only then could the United States raise the number of visas it hands out, reducing the ***wait***, he said.

Yudi, who has an eighth-grade education and comes from a poor family, said she decided to try to emigrate after struggling to make ends meet on her salary of about $31 a week, two-thirds of which went to food and transportation to and from her job.

"One day I realized I was only making enough to feed and clothe myself," she said. "I wanted to have a house someday, maybe start a business, and with what I was earning I would never be able to do it."

After visiting the U.S. consulate, Yudi went back to her job at a potato chip factory. But she couldn't stop thinking about her meager salary and the opportunities in America, she said.

Her brother had crossed the border illegally several years before, and he was working in Colorado.

In March, she struck out alone for the border.

The trip ***took*** her six months. On the Guatemala-Mexico border, she says, she was robbed and sexually assaulted by four men. Near Mexico City, she saw a freight train slice off the leg of a fellow traveler after he fell onto the tracks.

On the Arizona border, she hiked through the desert for three days with no food.

In Phoenix, she was held captive and assaulted again by smugglers. She escaped from the house where she was held and ran toward a passing car and begged for help.

The driver gave her a ride out of the neighborhood. From there, she made her way downtown and into an office to ask for help. The office workers called Respect Respeto, an aid group for illegal immigrants in Phoenix.

The group plans to apply for a U visa, one given to victims of violent crimes, because of the rapes Yudi said she suffered in Phoenix, Garcia said. A U visa would allow her to live and work in the USA for up to four years while authorities investigate the crimes.

"All I wanted," Yudi said, "was a better life."

Yudi says she knows many Americans accuse her and other undocumented migrants of simply not wanting to follow the rules.

"All I ***can*** tell those people is that if we ***immigrate*** illegally, we're not doing it for fun," she said, her voice cracking. "If they really want people to stop ***immigrating*** illegally, then give us an opportunity. Give us a chance."

Hawley is Latin America correspondent for USA TODAY and The Arizona Republic

## Graphic

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