

For weekend editions Aug. 21-22 and thereafter; Illegal immigrants live in the shadows to pursue the American dream

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

August 19, 2004, Thursday, BC cycle

Copyright 2004 Associated Press All Rights Reserved

Section: State and Regional

Length: 997 words

Byline: By DEBRA DOMINGUEZ, Albuquerque Journal

Dateline: ALBUQUERQUE

Body

It's mid-afternoon and a construction crew is working on the wooden frame of a new home. With hammers and drills in hand, the workers focus on their goal: finishing the job and getting paid.

"Everything you see here - all of us - are illegal," said Valente, a 22-year-old Mexican **immigrant** from Chihuahua.

"If it weren't for us, you wouldn't see all this construction going up," he said while pointing to dozens of new, stucco-frosted homes. "No one else is lining up to take these hard-labor jobs."

Valente is one of an estimated 50,000 **undocumented immigrants living** in New Mexico, according to state Labor Department spokesman Carlos Castaneda.

And Valente isn't alone in saying the risks of illegal immigration are worth the rewards: U.S. opportunity and financial security.

"We believe a good majority of (**undocumented immigrants**) are participating in steady or seasonal employment," Castaneda said, noting that about 857,000 people are employed in the state.

Because the majority of **undocumented immigrants live** in the **shadows**, they are hard to track, Castaneda said.

Isela, an **undocumented** Mexican **immigrant** who entered the United States 10 years ago with her husband and three children, knows about **life** in the **shadows**.

"We paid a coyote to walk us through back trails," said Isela, who is now a retail worker in Santa Fe. "It took us 12 hours to get to Deming. The walk was tiring and scary but worth all I have now."

Today, Isela and her husband **live** "as good a **life** as possible" in New Mexico, considering they have to hide their true identities.

"It's hard for my girls because they have to be careful not to tell their friends too much," Isela said of her three teenage daughters, who she hopes will one day become U.S. citizens.

Speaking perfect English and looking quite Americanized, Isela's children talked candidly about growing up as **undocumented immigrants**.

For weekend editions Aug. 21-22 and thereafter; Illegal immigrants live in the shadows to pursue the American dream

"The hardest thing for me is knowing I can't go to a university like many of my friends," said Isela's 18-year-old daughter, a recent graduate of the Santa Fe public schools. "I don't qualify for financial aid because I'm undocumented."

Her plan, she said, is to find steady work, save money and attend a community college.

"The tuition's cheaper there," she said. "It'll be hard to pay my way through school, but I know I can do it."

Word of mouth is how most undocumented immigrants learn about available work, said Saul, a Mexican immigrant who makes a living selling frozen treats from a pushcart.

"A lot of people will hire you without your papers," he said. "And if you don't have documents, you can always find people who sell them or borrow someone's Social Security number to apply."

Other undocumented immigrants say they can appear to apply for a job legally by using a state-issued driver's license and an Individual Tax Identification Number from the Internal Revenue Service.

Employers are supposed to get a Social Security number before hiring any worker, but immigrants say many will accept the tax ID number.

The IRS issues nine-digit tax ID numbers so that workers without Social Security numbers can pay federal income taxes.

"These ITINs look just like Social Security numbers," said Steven A. Camarota, director of research for the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C. "If the IRS is issuing them and employers are accepting them, why wouldn't undocumented workers use them to get jobs?"

Olivia, a Santa Fe retail worker and undocumented immigrant from Monterrey, Mexico, said the system doesn't make sense.

"On one side, the government says it's OK to file taxes and gives us driver's licenses," she said. "And on the other, it sends la migra (the U.S. Border Patrol) after us."

Disgruntled with the American dream and tired of living with "fear and racism," Olivia says she will soon return to Mexico. "I work long hours - too long," she said. "My boss knows she can take advantage of us undocumented if she wants, and she does. I'm just tired of that. We're like their puppets."

Like many undocumented immigrants, Valente is adamant about his place in society.

"We're here, and we're working," he said while standing on stilts, maneuvering himself with circus-performer skill over construction debris.

"Since we've been here, we've seen la migra go by twice," he said. "But nothing's happened because they know if they picked us up, there wouldn't be anybody left to work. So why don't they just give us all papers?"

Camarota said that about two-thirds of the estimated 9 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States have jobs.

"Of the working, I estimate at least half pay payroll taxes whether it's with falsified documentation or documentation of some other kind," Camarota said. "The other half is working off the books but still contribute to the economy by paying sales taxes."

And the undocumented work force isn't taking jobs away from anybody, Castaneda said.

"They already contribute," he said. "And they're filling jobs we need filled."

For weekend editions Aug. 21-22 and thereafter; Illegal immigrants live in the shadows to pursue the American dream

Whether entering the United States illegally by foot, paying truckers to smuggle them in or failing to return when temporary work or student visas expire, many **immigrants** say the risks are worth gaining opportunities.

Oftentimes, though, the promise of the American dream is cut short by the reality of deportation.

Between April 2003 and April 2004, the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended 3,126 **undocumented immigrants** in the Albuquerque area, said Patrick Hernandez, Albuquerque's U.S. Border Patrol agent in charge.

Saul said the area's small Border Patrol force isn't what inspires him to walk the city's streets fearlessly.

"I have nothing to lose," said the 22-year-old street vendor. "There's nothing for me back in Mexico.

"Here, I sell my ice cream for 50 cents and make a total of about \$50 a day," he said. "That's a better **living** than I'd ever make in Mexico. And if I'm caught, well, I'll just come back."

Graphic

AP photos planned

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); ILLEGAL **IMMIGRANTS** (91%); CHILDREN (89%); CITIZENSHIP (77%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (74%); SEASONAL WORKERS (73%); LABOR DEPARTMENTS (72%); COMMUNITY COLLEGES (64%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (64%); TUITION FEES (64%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (60%)

Industry: CONSTRUCTION (90%); EDUCATION SYSTEMS & INSTITUTIONS (74%); FROZEN DESSERTS (67%); COMMUNITY COLLEGES (64%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (64%); PUBLIC SCHOOLS (60%)

Geographic: SANTA FE, NM, USA (92%); NEW MEXICO, USA (92%); MEXICO (93%); UNITED STATES (92%)

Load-Date: August 22, 2004