Invisible Community's Hushed Cheer; 'Guest Worker' Plan Excites Area's Illegal Mexican Immigrants

The Washington Post

December 27, 2003 Saturday, Final Edition

The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: A Section; A01

Length: 1110 words

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Body

It's been 25 years since Jorge Saavedra slipped over the border from Mexico, one more peasant fleeing poverty. He is now the established owner of two Hispanic grocery stores in the Maryland suburbs, but he has never forgotten his early struggle to survive.

So when Saavedra heard this week that President Bush was ***planning*** to establish a "***guest worker***" program and to legalize other ***immigrants*** already here, he was thrilled.

"All of us who came from there had a lot of hunger," said Saavedra, a small man with slicked-back hair, standing next to a plastic locker of warm tortillas in La Poblanita, his shop in Riverdale Park in Prince George's County. "The people over there come to work. They don't come to rob."

In the rapidly growing ***Mexican community*** in Washington, news of possible immigration reform has inspired curiosity and hope. Mexicans, who make up roughly half of the country's ***illegal immigrants***, will probably be among the main beneficiaries of the program.

Bush is expected to announce his proposal in mid-January. The program, which is still being developed, would require the approval of Congress, which has largely opposed easing immigration requirements since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Shoppers interviewed in Riverdale Park, where a sort of Little Mexico has flourished in recent years, were cautious about the possibility of a new immigration program, with some wondering if it would be nothing more than an election-year tease. If it does happen, they said, thousands of lives could be transformed, in ways large and small.

"A work permit would let you go to other places where you could earn more. Imagine! I'd be so happy," said Marisela, a 30-year-old single mother who works as a cashier to support her three children back in Mexico. The Riverdale Park resident declined to provide her last name because she is here illegally.

Roberto, 25, who also withheld his surname, comes from a family whose members have immigrated to the United States seeking work for two generations. But now, he said, the simplest transactions are nearly impossible without a work permit or Social Security card.

"It's a basic element you need. If you go anywhere, buy a car, get a cellular, they ask for your Social Security," said the construction worker, who lives in Manassas. Many immigrants resort to using fake documents at such moments but fear getting caught and perhaps arrested.

Although Mexicans represent the biggest immigrant group in the United States, for years they were nearly invisible in the Washington area. That is changing. Salvadorans remain the region's largest immigrant group, but, according to the 2000 Census, the nearly 32,400 Mexicans make theirs the fifth-largest community, trailing the Korean, Indian and Vietnamese groups. The current number of Mexicans could be much higher, experts say, because groups with large numbers of undocumented people are often underrepresented in census data.

Concentrations of Mexicans have developed in such places as Manassas, Alexandria and Hyattsville. In the census tract of East Riverdale, almost half the foreign-born population is from Mexico, nearly 2,200 people.

Saavedra, who reached the United States in time for the last major immigration amnesty in 1986, sees the growth reflected in the Mexican-owned restaurants, bakeries and groceries that have sprung up not far from his shop near Kenilworth Avenue and East West Highway. His store bustles with customers seeking Mexican favorites: Jumex guava nectar; tamarind seeds; plastic tubs of rich, dark mole sauce; even lollipops dusted with chile powder.

"All these people are in construction," said Saavedra, 45, a native of Puebla state, waving at men in jeans and paint-spattered boots who were picking up containers of lard or examining the packets of dried chiles, 14 different varieties. "They're all Mexican. Honestly, this kind of opportunity doesn't exist in Mexico."

Opportunity may draw Mexicans to the Washington area, but it hasn't been easy for many to get work permits. Salvadorans and other Central Americans have benefited over the years from programs granting temporary residence to people whose homelands were engulfed in war or lashed by natural disasters. No such program has been open to Mexicans.

Some have lived in the shadows for more than a decade, hoping to become legal.

Gina, a 31-year-old cleaning woman, arrived in the area 13 years ago, planning to earn money to help her parents, who scratch out a living on a tiny farm in the southern Mexican state of Veracruz. She married another Mexican here and has two boys, ages 9 and 4. Without U.S. residency papers, she is reluctant to visit home, for fear she won't be able to get back across the border.

"It's been so long since I saw my father," she said, shaking her head. "If I went, I'd be afraid for my children. Something could happen to me. And they're small." She declined to provide her last name.

For all their hopes, the Mexicans are aware that it won't be easy to get a new program. Public opinion has swung against immigration since the terrorist attacks. Some politicians and citizens feel that granting work permits would reward those who arrived illegally.

And many worry that increased immigration will hurt U.S. workers. The Bush plan would reportedly create a Web-based job registry in which employers who fail to find U.S. workers could offer positions to foreign "guest workers." In addition, some undocumented immigrants could get work authorization.

"The 'guest worker' provision of this proposal will sound the death knell of the American middle class," Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, said in a statement. "Employers will never again have to compete for workers by offering better pay or benefits. They will simply have to look across the border."

Many immigrants disagreed.

Javier Ramirez sees immigration reform as a question of justice and a way to avoid the hundreds of deaths that occur each year as migrants traipse across baking deserts or hide in locked railcars and trucks. The construction worker scoffed at the idea that U.S. workers could be harmed.

"Americans don't want to do this job. If we fix the Americans' highways, why can't we have papers?" asked the 40-year-old resident of Manassas, who has lived in the United States for 17 years and was sponsored for residency by an employer.

But his brother Jose, who drives a cement truck, said he couldn't imagine the program would solve the problems in the U.***S***. immigration system. "Too many people would want to come. They all couldn't come," he said. "So people would still arrive illegally."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (89%); SOCIAL SECURITY (87%); ***ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS*** (78%); WORKING MOTHERS (76%); IMMIGRATION LAW (76%); FOREIGN LABOR (76%); ARRESTS (73%); POVERTY & HOMELESSNESS (73%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (68%); APPROVALS (67%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (66%); TERRORISM (66%); TERRORIST ATTACKS (51%); CENSUS (50%); SINGLE PARENTS (50%)

Industry: GROCERY STORES & SUPERMARKETS (73%)

Geographic: MARYLAND, USA (90%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: December 27, 2003