

# **SILENT GUESTS; LITTLE NOTICED, ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE GROWING PRESENCE HERE**

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

October 15, 1995, Sunday, FIVE STAR LIFT Edition

Copyright 1995 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Inc.

**Section:** WAR PAGE; Pg. 1B; PROFILE **ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS** IN THE ST. LOUIS AREA

**Length:** 3100 words

**Byline:** Philip Dine Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

## **Body**

---

THE TALL, LEAN man in his 30s has been here four months. He sorts tomatoes, chili peppers and corn at a produce center, then washes dishes at a restaurant.

Texas was tough, with authorities constantly on the lookout, he says. St. Louis, by contrast, "is a quiet place for living."

In his case, he quickly adds, such concerns don't matter, because he has papers and came up from Mexico the proper way, on a bus.

Most of the others in the little apartment abruptly stop what they're doing. Several gaze at the floor, as if embarrassed by Julio's blatantly false claim.

For they, like Julio, belong to one of St. Louis' fastest-growing and most-hidden groups - illegal immigrants.

They number 12,000 to 16,000, and their path here is widening as a result of a healthy job market, hostility in other regions, a convenient location and the very anonymity offered by the area's inattention to immigration. Mexicans form by far the biggest portion of a group that includes Indians and Nigerians, Canadians and Poles.

Fourteen Mexicans live in the two apartments - Julio and six other men in one, an extended family in the other - on the top floor of the three-story building a few blocks south of Tower Grove Park.

They do their daily chores quietly, to avoid being caught and deported, but their undocumented status complicates everything. So their lives have evolved into a furtive chaos.

Just getting to work involves a choreography of 12 adults, 20 jobs, a few old cars, manufactured licenses and hours that vary daily. They've got it down now: Two or three men each drive a handful of others on designated routes, then at day's end leave work and pick them up in reverse order.

Saturday evening provides a rare respite as they gather in one of the apartments, that of Elena and Luis.

Several speak of their paths here and their goals. Julio hopes to save enough money, after sending \$ 70 a month to his family in Mexico, to eventually return home and start a small business. But if he follows the pattern of most, that dream will prove as illusory as the validity of his documents, and he'll end up sending for his family to join him here.

Elena, 30, stands guard at the door, left hand on the knob, right hand pressed against her teeth, monitoring the various conversations, clearly the dominant presence.

## SILENT GUESTS; LITTLE NOTICED, ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE GROWING PRESENCE HERE

The 14, from near the U.S.-Mexican border and used to urban life, are adapting faster than the many who have come to St. Louis from the state of Michoacan in Mexico's mountainous central region. For instance, they have a telephone.

Still perspiring after a day's work with the large lawn-care firm whose logo is on his green shirt, Luis walks over and sits on a window ledge to tell his story.

A couple of years ago, as Mexican immigration here was picking up, he headed north from the state of Chihuahua, choosing St. Louis because a friend lived here. He paid a raftsmen \$ 5 to take him, his wife and two children across the Rio Grande. They got as far as the airport in El Paso before immigration officials turned them back.

Two weeks later, Luis tried alone, swimming the river to save the money. Past the border, he crossed a highway and walked the half-mile to a train yard. Mindful of the security guards, he waited under trees until dusk, spotted a cage door ajar on a train ready to transport new cars, found the keys to a car and settled in - for a three-day trip ending, it turned out, in Kansas City.

Before leaving Mexico, Luis had sent his friend a photograph as asked. When he arrived on a Sunday, Social Security and permanent resident alien cards awaited him, a made-in-Chicago present that cost his relative \$ 120, a typical price. The next day, Luis was working at a food-packing plant.

Luis is 32, but because his buddy overestimated his age when getting the cards made, he has to use 34.

The documents he and Elena bought look crude, yet have taken the two unquestioned through a string of jobs - yard work, demolition, food packaging, tube cutting, restaurant and hotel cleaning. But when problems arise - such as his wife's two bounced paychecks totaling \$ 816 - he feels uncomfortable saying much.

Luis and Elena invented a Social Security number for their 6-year-old and bought a card for \$ 30 for the 12-year-old, in case someone asks for them in school.

They avoid or are ineligible for most government programs, paying out of pocket for a sick child and market rate for their apartment.

Julio is resigned to leaving if caught. His one regret is the lack of a genuine drivers license, which would at least elevate his commute to a quasi-legal activity. "I'd like to get one," he says, "but I don't know what they're going to ask." 'This Is A Peaceful City'

Chester Moyer, local director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, has been negotiating with Trans World Airlines about a 6:25 a.m. flight from Mexico City that the airline plans to introduce Oct. 30.

Moyer wants the flight to arrive when his small staff is on duty, given his concern it will add, even if minimally, to what he calls a dramatic rise in illegal immigration here.

Tipoffs to a surge: Jammed hallways in the Robert A. Young Federal Building on recent mornings set aside for questions about amnesty programs, and the jostling for position when the INS door opens. Or, the bodies found now and then along the railroad tracks, dumped out with the coal as someone slept on a freight train.

The INS recently has engaged in more joint raids with agencies handling occupational safety, labor, environmental protection and law enforcement. That reflects not a crackdown but a proportional response to a growing flow, Moyer says. As the numbers rise, he is shifting focus to the larger scene - uncovering those who help transport illegal aliens, supply their papers or employ them.

People who counsel illegal immigrants are watching warily but still see this area as comparatively safe, a perception helping to fuel the influx.

"It's low key. This is a very peaceful city," says Adela Peugnet-Lightle, a social worker with the city's Human Development Corp. "As long as you work and do your thing, nobody's going to bother you." Who's Here And How

## SILENT GUESTS; LITTLE NOTICED, ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE GROWING PRESENCE HERE

**Illegal immigrants** here, and nationally, split evenly into those who sneak into the country, usually over the U.S.-Mexican border, and those who enter with documents but overstay their authorized visit.

About 80 percent of those here who entered illegally are Mexicans but enough Central and South Americans and Asians now cross the southern border that officials have coined the acronym "OTMs" - Other Than Mexicans. If caught, Central Americans sometimes claim to be Mexicans so they'll be deported closer to the U.S. border, making their return quicker.

Others come openly but remain after their authorization expires. About 10 to 15 percent of Indians and Pakistanis here have done that, authorities say, as have some Africans and Canadians.

Cautiously, between waiting on customers in a West County convenience store, a middle-aged scientist from India who emigrated here legally three years ago described a brazen attitude among his countrymen without proper documents.

"They're not scared at all," he says. "They say, 'What are they going to do once we are here? They don't deport us. They don't come up to us. They don't look for us. Why should we be scared?' "

Many Indians work in small stores or doughnut shops owned by friends or relatives throughout St. Louis County.

Some come with no papers at all, crossing the U.S.-Mexican border, the clerk says, while others carry another person's passport.

Agents in India pay up to \$ 2,500 to buy a passport from someone who has returned from a U.S. visit, then sell the document, stamped with a visitor's visa, for \$ 3,000 to someone wanting to move to the United States and who resembles the original holder.

"They only have the passport in hand a few days, to get past customs, then they give it back to someone from the smuggling operation," the clerk says. "One passport can bring 100 people in."

He hears about this regularly from customers and encountered it personally this summer on a trip to India when people offered to bring over his son, who may have to wait six years to get here legally.

The 6,000 Mexicans estimated to be in the St. Louis area illegally are the fastest-**growing** group, with a family of three or four arriving on an average day, say Hispanics who work with **immigrants**. Many settle in south St. Louis or the Metro East area; 40 percent of Fairmont City's 2,300 residents are Mexican, with **illegal aliens** forming about 15 percent of the city's entire population.

Increasingly, the new arrivals are secondary **immigrants** - fleeing political controversy, legal crackdowns or economic competition in states with large Hispanic populations such as California, Texas or Florida, for the safer turf of an initially overlooked Midwestern city.

The atmosphere may be calmer here, but the old fears linger. It also may be harder to blend in. And the low-key nature of the Hispanic **presence** leaves many feeling isolated, with **little** support network.

"These are people who stay at home, people who don't want anyone to know they're here," says Jesus Ituarte, whose South Grand Boulevard law practice of 10 months centers on Hispanic **immigrants**.

"They work, they eat, they lock themselves inside. They close their windows even in summer. They're here, but they're almost invisible." Taking Risks On The Job

It's closing time at the upscale Mexican restaurant in St. Louis County. Manuel, 35, looks almost regal as he sweeps the floor, black hair combed neatly back, topped by his tall white hat. But the nervous way he glances at those who look his way suggests unease.

## SILENT GUESTS; LITTLE NOTICED, ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE GROWING PRESENCE HERE

All's fine, he insists. But join this stolid, reserved man on his day off in the sanctuary of a trusted church on North 14th Street in the city, and he explains his wariness: He fears being caught; he fears being hurt.

His previous job in a restaurant ended last year when, he says, he was cleaning an industrial refrigerator with a wet rag. An electric shock propelled his right hand backward into a sharp metal edge that slashed his wrist.

A supervisor took him to a hospital where a doctor treated the hand, then asked for insurance papers. The supervisor said she'd bring them next time.

But there were none, and he had trouble getting further care. At the urging of a doctor, he wound up suing the restaurant.

Going to court carries dangers, Manuel knows, and he worries about what the judge will ask him.

In five years here after a stint in Houston, Manuel has remodeled apartments, cleaned restaurants and worked in a Chinese noodle factory.

"I do not feel the liberty to object, to say this is dangerous," he says. "I do what I am told to do."

Hiring illegal immigrants may save the employer taxes, and provides compliant workers who will do unpleasant and even dangerous work, accept low pay and long hours without overtime and who are unlikely to complain if they are fired or anything goes wrong. It is a formula both sides accept.

Work is the likeliest place for illegals to be caught, because strapped INS officials focus on areas inviting danger or exploitation. Making It Seem Official

Many Mexicans here work in Asian or Mexican restaurants.

Others work for lawn-care firms, enough so a new word of sorts - "yarda" - has cropped up here among Hispanics to designate that type of work.

Those jobs, like ones pouring concrete or shredding autos, are plentiful and may require scant training or English. The businesses tend to be small or mobile and hard to track down; or they deal in cash and can disguise the number of employees.

Fraudulent papers come mainly from Chicago, with those from Los Angeles taking longer and costing more. Some now apparently are being made here. How good they look varies and may be immaterial.

"The employers know the cards aren't valid - but they're willing to look the other way," says someone who has helped many obtain them. "If something happens, they can say, 'Hey, he showed me the card. I'm not an INS officer. I can't distinguish.' "

Newcomers learn how the system functions at several locations, including local markets and dance halls - or at the soccer games played Sundays in a desolate stretch of near-north St. Louis.

The robust man of 33 who sometimes guards the goal has placed fellow Mexicans in Chinese restaurants here and around Missouri, including Jefferson City, Columbia and Springfield.

They start at about \$ 250 weekly as dishwashers, busboys or, sometimes, prep cooks. They work six days a week, often 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. They are fed at the restaurant and are paid in cash.

Workers who are injured, at a restaurant or another job, may be told by a "company doctor" to rest briefly and resume work.

"It's real bogus," says Ituarte, the South Grand lawyer. "They know it, and I know it. But it covers the eye, as we say in Spanish - makes it seem real official."

## SILENT GUESTS; LITTLE NOTICED, ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE GROWING PRESENCE HERE

**Illegal** Polish **immigrants** have worked here at several nursing homes, including three fined \$ 64,000 by the INS last month for employing a dozen **illegal immigrants** - most of them Poles, a few Filipinos. In some cases, Poles fly to Chicago as tourists, overstay their visas, buy documents and seek work in St. Louis.

More elusive is whether St. Louis ends up with some of the Chinese brought into this country and forced to work until they pay their debt, about \$ 30,000, to the smugglers.

Many have come over the past decade to New York, which is so saturated that wages are tumbling. Some of those smuggled in are being dispersed to other parts of the country, says Peter Kwong of Hunter College in New York, who writes about Chinese smuggling.

Tong Gao, an immigration lawyer who emigrated from China to St. Louis seven years ago, says: "I personally have been contacted by some of these people - enslaved, smuggled Chinese. They ask me to help, but I can't."

A couple of times a month, Moyer's immigration agency finds Chinese here working for a pittance in a restaurant and housed together.

"We could never prove they were living under that kind of situation where they sign themselves over to the owner, though we suspected they did," Moyer says. "We just treat them as **illegal** workers, not as part of a criminal organization." 'They're Scared'

As Maria Luisa, here two years, walks through her high school's halls, some students taunt her for poor English. Or they step on her pant cuffs from behind.

Kid stuff, perhaps, but she feels vulnerable and is reluctant to draw attention to herself or her family.

Her mother can sew the pants but can't help Maria Luisa with school.

"I feel bad," the mother says, "because sometimes Maria Luisa will tell me there will be meetings with the parents, and I can't go."

Priscilla Schulz, social worker for English as Second Language students in St. Louis, notes a sizeable increase in Mexican students this year. Other groups, aside from Bosnian refugees, remain stable.

Schulz finds dealing with undocumented families delicate, especially getting forms signed for lunch or other programs.

"They're scared, and rightly so," she says. "The attitude in a lot of places is so xenophobic. Some secretaries in some schools, as soon as they hear someone's **illegal**, they get uptight. I have to let them know there's legal precedent, we're supposed to serve them."

By law, schools serve all children living in their districts, whether they are here legally or not. Some subsidized programs, such as lunch, require documentation.

Some families avoid the risks of school by keeping their children home.

Either way, living surreptitiously can wear upon a child's psyche.

"That's the saddest part I've discovered in dealing with these people - when they're not proud in front of the world," says social worker Peugeot-Lightle. "Many of these children were not allowed to say, 'I have a mother and father, and my mother is so and so,' because of the documents. It is part of their identity."

In many families, some people are here legally and some are not. So all members must be careful.

Peugnet-Lightle, a native of Nicaragua, encounters many mothers who give birth at home - one way to avoid the health care system. William Chignoli, a doctor in Argentina and founder here of Hispanic Community Social Action, reports less immunization among undocumented families.

## SILENT GUESTS; LITTLE NOTICED, ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE GROWING PRESENCE HERE

Alarmed by such developments, the March of Dimes in St. Louis plans a conference for December.

"We want people to speak out about what their needs are, why they're not getting access and how this is affecting their infant mortality rates and low-birth weights," says spokeswoman Carrie Marshall.

"So many are afraid to get real help, because then they would be known." Fear Of Being Overwhelmed

With virtually no public attention, Jim Montgomery, a state representative from Texas County in south-central Missouri, delved into the issue of illegal aliens in the past legislative session.

Montgomery, R-Cabool, feared restrictive measures in other states, such as California's Proposition 187, would drive them here.

"We Missourians sometimes have a soft heart," he says. "We tend to take care of people."

So he wrote House Bill 113, denying to illegal immigrants most public benefits. He backed off after an initial hearing but, saying he fears the state could end up overwhelmed, is open to renewing his bid.

"We feel they should stay home and make their country a better place to live, rather than come up here." A Way Of Fitting In

Rafael, dark eyes anxiously darting, and Christian, cap sideways over his blond hair and fear etched on his pale face, were hungry and disoriented as they wandered about south St. Louis at dawn, after a week on a train from southern Mexico.

No English, no jobs, no friends, no plans for these two 17-year-olds, whose almost arbitrary arrival here reflects the growth of St. Louis as a destination where some simply hope for the best.

A neighborhood resident pointed them to the small apartment of Juanita and Poli and their eight children. For the past month, the family has stretched the white corn and beans a bit further.

Juanita knows well where the two youths could buy documents if only they could scrape up the required \$ 100 apiece. She hopes someone will risk giving them work for a week or two, so they can buy papers and get a permanent job. Illegal, yes, but from her perspective that's how they can start fitting into the system.

## Graphic

---

PHOTO, GRAPHIC; (1) Color Photo By Scott Dine/Post-Dispatch - It's been long climb for this family of eight from Mexico to this second-floor flat in St. Louis. The mother and one of her children bid goodbye to visitors. Their images have been shaded electronically to protect their identities. (Caption changed from THREE STAR edition, which reads:) It's been a long climb for this family of eight from Mexico to this second-floor flat in St. Louis. The mother and one of her children bid goodbye to visitors. (2) Photo By Scott Dine/Post-Dispatch - These teen-age boys ran away from their homes in Mexico, one to escape a bad family situation and both to find work, and hopped freight trains before arriving lost in St. Louis. A Mexican family here is sheltering them until they get fake documents and then jobs. (3) Photo By Scott Dine/Post-Dispatch - These young Mexican immigrants must overcome a variety of hurdles, from a language barrier to a cramped apartment that is home to 10 people, as they study for school. Their mother is concerned; she doesn't speak English and can't accomplish anything at school meetings. (4) Graphic Chart - Illegal Immigrants

Selected groups in the St. Louis area	Mexicans	6,000	Indians	600
Pakistanis	375	Canadians	250	Russians
			225	Polish
				200
				Palestinians
				200
				Chinese
				200
				Nigerians
				150
				El Salvadorans
				100
				Guatemalans
				100
				South Africans
				100

These are Post-Dispatch estimates based on discussions with immigrant associations, people who work with immigrants and government officials.

SILENT GUESTS; LITTLE NOTICED, ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE GROWING PRESENCE HERE

## Classification

---

**Language:** English

**Subject:** FAMILY (70%); **ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS** (70%); IMMIGRATION (70%); LABOR MARKET (65%)

**Industry:** RESTAURANTS (69%)

**Geographic:** SAINT LOUIS, MO, USA (71%); CANADA (79%)

**Load-Date:** October 15, 1995

---

End of Document