

The Dallas Morning News

High-end migrants from Mexico lead new wave to Dallas Area

BY ALFREDO CORCHADO
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Leticia Sañudo sits outside her establishment — La Paloma Taquería — next to the Neiman Marcus department store at NorthPark Center and marvels at her good fortune. She left behind a life of privilege in Mexico City, traded everything she knew to come to Dallas with her three boys. And things couldn't be better.

“The circumstances of my country, security mainly, pushed us north,” said Sañudo, who enrolled her sons at Coppell High School and later saw one of them head to Texas A&M University. “We represent a new migration.”

Call them *migrantes fresas* — high-end migrants — a phrase coined by some of the new arrivals and their hosts to separate them from previous waves of immigrants from Mexico. Lured to North Texas by its geographic proximity to their homeland, with some 20 daily flights to Mexico, and by what many call the area's growing sophistication and quality of life, the transplants represent the latest wave of immigrants helping to transform the region.

“A lot of people are coming, but the information is based more on anecdotes than on specific statistics,” said Pia Orrenius, an immigration expert at the Dallas Federal Reserve Bank. “It's not just a brain drain, but a capital drain for Mexico.”

EB-5 visa program

Since 2009, the city of Dallas has been pursuing an investment program, known as the EB-5 visa program, under which foreign grant applicants get permanent residency in exchange for investments of \$500,000 and the creation of at least 10 jobs. Businessman Mario Ramírez makes several trips a year to Mexico City to host dinners with potential investors and talk up the EB-5 program.

Ramírez is a director of Civitas Capital Management, which, along with Dallas, oversees new investment. About 240 investors have since put some \$119 million in North Texas under the program. About 70 percent are from Asian countries, most of them from China, and 30 percent are from countries including the United Kingdom, Russia, India, Nigeria and Mexico, which has the fastest-growing group of investors, said Rick Black, a spokesman for Civitas.

Projects that have resulted include the NYLO hotel, a call center known as Encore Enterprises, a nursing home for low-income patients, a multifamily development in Oak Cliff, a mixed-used residential retail development and the expansion of a local restaurant chain.

“Today, we're experiencing a more sophisticated *fresa* migration, people with money,” said Ramírez, who is also part owner of La Paloma Taquería and author of *Paisanologia Empresarial*, a profile of immigrants living throughout the United States and their formulas for success. “This isn't your father's or grandfather's migration anymore. The circumstances are different.”

In recent years, two competing narratives

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emerged across Mexico: The country of 114 million people has largely withstood the global financial chaos, continually slowing

job growth and economic stability. But all the while powerful drug cartels, assisted by corrupt government officials, have generated mayhem, in many cases pushing the elite out. These migrants call themselves the faces of the country's collateral damage, tracing their arrival to extortions, kidnappings and killings that have pushed Mexico into a wave of insecurity since 2006 or before.

This month, the nongovernmental National Citizens Observatory group released figures showing that crime-related deaths had increased 84 percent since December 2006, when President Felipe Calderón sent the military and federal police forces to attack organized crime, beginning with his home state of Michoacán. Overall, an estimated 60,000 people have been killed since then, although the number of drug killings has been dropping.

But the actual figures are likely higher, especially when people who have disappeared are factored in. The newspaper *Milenio*, using declassified documents obtained through Mexico's freedom-of-information law, estimated that more than 24,000 people have gone missing since 2006. And although drug killings have been falling, overall homicides and extortions continue to increase this year, according to the report and its director, Ricardo Sepulveda.

"The truth is we haven't seen a reduction in crimes in general, and those are the ones that

most affect the security of the country," he said.

'Best-kept secret'

The result is an exodus, with echoes of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, which pushed tens of thousands of Mexicans to settle throughout the southwestern U.S. The new arrivals are investing in places such as San Diego, El Paso, San Antonio and, increasingly, Dallas, creating jobs throughout North Texas.

"Dallas was always the best-kept secret," said a Mexican official based in Dallas, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Mexicans headed to Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, New York, San Antonio, but the secret is out because Mexicans are now everywhere in Dallas. Many Mexicans, especially the wealthy ones, are discovering the real potential of Dallas, its glitz, sophistication and business opportunities — the complete package."

Once a month, organizers host a mixer whose sole purpose is to provide a networking venue for new arrivals. The first Wednesday of every month, a group of Mexicans and their guests gather at a bar — the location changes every time — and mingle. Recently, about 50 showed up in Addison.

"I wanted to bring a little bit of Mexico to Dallas, so I created this," said businesswoman Claudia Hermann, who started with eight people and has a mailing

list of more than 1,300. "Many come here because of opportunity, but you cannot hide

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the fact that even more are coming out of concerns for their own security.”

Watching the scene unfold that evening was Teresa Haselden, a real estate agent at the Raul Arriaga Group in Dallas. Before her latest job, Haselden worked at the Mexican Consulate, where she began to see new migration patterns unfold.

“We were all celebrating the democracy back in Mexico,” she said, referring to the election of President Vicente Fox, whose victory in 2000 ended the seven-decade reign of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. “Back here in Dallas, I started noticing that the people arriving weren’t just the poor anymore. The rich were also coming. Something had gone wrong.”

Standing near her, Rafael Manrique, owner of Faelo, a furniture import company, sipped tequila as a football game beamed on a giant TV. He expressed concern about Mexico’s out-migration.

“We Texans, Americans in general, are benefiting, and Mexico is losing,” he said. “Mexico won’t be able to sustain the loss of so many talented people. It can’t. No country can.”

Ramírez said he wasn’t so sure. The new arrivals have mobility, green cards or are transnational citizens, meaning they can invest in both countries, he said.

“I think both sides enrich themselves,” he said. “In the end, we’re a mirror of what is happening in both our countries; we’re coming together. I don’t necessarily see it as capital flight.”

Ramírez and others say many of the arrivals

are lured by Dallas’ location, which makes it easy for people to lead dual lives. Some already possessed dual citizenship. Others had business or family ties or links to schools like Southern Methodist University.

“Many graduates return and settle down,” said Manuel Rosas, manager of Taco Diner in West Village. “I have two crowds here: the Dallasites, who usually arrive early, and then the Mexican nationals, who, because of customs, eat and drink later into the evening.”

No turning back

Some of the new arrivals make lifelong decisions on the spot. A tire executive from San Luis Potosí, who had been followed by shady men for days, stepped on the gas one afternoon and didn’t stop until he crossed into Texas. He now lives in Dallas. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he continues to cross the border, attending to business and keeping a low profile.

But Sañudo isn’t sure she’ll ever return to Mexico. In 2005, she feared being kidnapped and saw no future for her boys. Through a friend she met Ramírez and offered to invest in some of his eight taco restaurants. She took her savings and bought into Ramírez’s La Paloma Taquería. She is helping create jobs and introducing authentic tacos to Dallas’ upper echelons who shop next door.