

Thousands of unauthorized workers seek the American Dream in Galveston County

By TOM BASSING Correspondent | Posted: Saturday, December 3, 2016 11:00 pm

Shortly after his 17th birthday, Francisco López set off for the United States, leaving behind in his village in north-central Honduras his mother, stepfather, a brother and three sisters on what became a yearlong trek leading him first to Texas City and eventually to Galveston.

Two years ago, he learned that the youngest of his sisters, 11-year-old Cesia Marena, had died of a congenital disability, which at birth had left her legs useless. He received the grim news only after he had arranged to purchase a wheelchair for her and have it shipped home.

He called with the good news, only for his mother to tell him it was too late.

“I cried for like a year,” López, now 22, said outside the auto-body repair shop he operates in Galveston. “I loved my sister so much.”

Now, he works to provide for the rest of his family.

López arrived in Texas speaking no English — he learned the language while attending school part time after work, at first as a landscaper in Texas City, where he had an uncle, then as an auto-body apprentice in Galveston.

Today, he is one of 8 million unauthorized workers in the United States, among an estimated population of 11.1 million unauthorized immigrants, according to a study released in November by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C.

‘Falsely documented’

Unauthorized workers comprise 5 percent of the nation’s overall workforce, according to the Pew center.

Some work for themselves. Many others are paid off the books or work under false identification.

“The data tell us that in terms of securing employment, about half of all undocumented workers have a false Social Security number,” said Jessica Brown, the interim director of the University of Houston’s Center for Immigration Research. “It’s not difficult to obtain one. You can find people at swap meets who can provide you one.”



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Francisco López paints a vehicle Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2016, outside the auto-body repair shop in Galveston. López, one of 8 million unauthorized workers in the United States, arrived in Galveston County after a year-long trek from his village in Honduras.

“The data also show that 25 percent of the restaurant services workforce nationwide are unauthorized workers. In Texas, it’s even higher because we’re a border state.”

Richie Jackson, chief executive officer of the Austin-based Texas Restaurant Association, contends that the industry doesn’t knowingly hire ineligible employees.

“There are very few undocumented workers in our industry,” he said. “What we have is a lot of falsely documented workers, whether it’s a fake driver’s license or Social Security card or some other ID.

“Even if you’re doing E-Verify, that won’t catch people who are using a stolen ID or someone else’s ID.”

Lax enforcement

E-Verify, the federal online registry established through the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, is designed to discourage job applicants’ use of false IDs. It largely has failed to do so.

“Only about 5 percent of states mandate that all employers use it,” Brown said. “Texas only requires it for filling positions at colleges and universities. Even states that require it for all employers don’t enforce it.”

That’s why E-Verify needs to be made mandatory, say those who advocate strict enforcement of federal immigration laws.

“We live in an age when companies like Visa and MasterCard can verify millions of credit card transactions every day,” said Ira Mehlman, chief spokesman for the Washington, D.C.-based Federation for American Immigration Reform. “The technology is there. What isn’t there is the will to enforce our laws.”

‘We had nothing’

Texas has the third-largest percentage share of unauthorized workers relative to its overall workforce, at about 8.5 percent, trailing only Nevada’s 10.4 percent and California’s 9 percent, according to a separate Pew report.

Many such laborers are driven by economic desperation.

“I came here because we had nothing in Honduras,” López said. “Here, I can work and help out my family.

“I send money home every month, \$100 or \$200, depending on what I can.”

Such remittances are lifelines for those subject to the whims of underperforming economies south of the border.

“The average monthly remittance to Mexico is \$290 to \$300,” Tony Payan, the director of the Mexico Center at Rice University’s Baker Institute, said.

He converted the latter figure into Mexican pesos at the current exchange rate, which fell sharply during the campaign in inverse step with the rise of President-elect Donald Trump’s electoral prospects. “You multiply \$300 by 20, that’s 6,000 pesos a month. That’s a very healthy injection into a family budget when the current minimum wage in Mexico is 58 pesos a day.”

‘Self-fulfilling prophecies’

Those who advocate stricter constraints on illegal employment argue that unauthorized laborers suppress wages for legal laborers, both native-born workers and lawful immigrants.

Mehlman cited an opinion piece by Harvard University professor of economic and social policy George Borjas, in which he contended that “wage trends over the past half-century suggest that a 10 percent increase in the number of workers with a particular set of skills probably lowers the wage of that group by at least 3 percent.”

Borjas, in his article, argued that any national economic gain derived from unauthorized labor is offset by the cost of providing taxpayer-funded services.

“Illegal alien labor isn’t cheap labor, it’s subsidized labor,” Mehlman said. “As a consumer, you may save money at the cash register, but you’re also paying for illegal workers’ health care and their children’s education. It’s cheap labor only for the direct employer. Everybody else is forced to subsidize their employees’ needs.”

He disputed employers’ contention — particularly those in agriculture and the hospitality industry — that they could not get by without unauthorized workers.

“Those are self-fulfilling prophecies,” Mehlman said. “If you own a restaurant in Galveston and you’re hiring illegal aliens and paying low wages and undercutting your competitors, they’re going to feel they have to do the same. What we need is a level playing field.”

An ongoing challenge

Those in the hospitality industry — Galveston’s economic mainstay — contend that hiring isn’t as simple as posting a help-wanted sign.

“Finding qualified workers in our industry is a challenge, same as with agriculture, same as with construction,” Jackson said. “These aren’t jobs you can outsource, they aren’t jobs you can send overseas.

“While I know there’s been a lot of talk of sealing the border, there also has to be some discussion of how do we fill entry-level jobs.”

Until then, some argue, unauthorized labor is the answer.

“There are areas in the hospitality industry where undocumented workers are on the payroll, with housekeepers, cooks, restaurant servers among them,” said John Zendt, the immediate past president of the Galveston chapter of the Texas Restaurant Association and a member of the Galveston Island Park Board of Trustees, which promotes tourism. “But without a certain number of such workers, it would be a lot more challenging for most people in the industry to fill positions.

“There has to be some pathway to citizenship.”

A lesson in civics

Enacting federal immigration reform to confer legal status on unauthorized workers currently seems unlikely.

President Ronald Reagan signed into law the last substantive such legislation, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which granted amnesty to many unauthorized immigrants but didn't create a way toward citizenship.

Subsequent federal reform efforts have failed. While a number of states have passed bills aimed at cracking down on illegal immigration, only the Great Recession, which began in 2007, led to a significant decline in the nation's unauthorized population.

Trump's election has cheered those favoring mass deportation.

"That was a cornerstone of his campaign," Mehlman said and pointed to the president-elect's nomination of Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions, an ardent foe of unlawful immigration, as U.S. Attorney General. "We believe there now will be a real effort to enforce our laws."

The nation's unauthorized population, in following the campaign, became well-versed with the intricacies of the Electoral College and its 270-vote threshold for election to the White House.

"We stayed up all night until Trump passed 270 votes," said López, who, with his Guatemalan girlfriend, also unauthorized, has a 2-year-old son and a 1-year-old daughter. "All that night I thought only about my family and what would they do if I got deported. Who's going to pay the rent? Who's going to pay for the Pampers?"

"I talked to God that night, and I said, 'I don't know your reason, Lord,' but I prayed for the best. That's all I can do."