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Dispatches: Guatemalan Migrants

Guatemalans returning home from the U.S. face unemployment, a maze of red tape—and social stigma. *(slideshow available)*

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Deported in 2008 from Postville, Iowa, where parents Fidelino and María worked at a kosher slaughterhouse, the Gómez family today scrapes by as subsistence farmers. Photo and homepage photo: Michael McDonald

[Dispatches: Guatemalan Migrants](#)

BY

[Michael McDonald](#)

Guatemalans returning home from the U.S. face unemployment, a maze of red tape—and social stigma. (*slideshow available*)

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Fidelino Gómez remembers fondly the years he spent in Iowa, where his middle child was born. Standing outside his one-room wood home in his native Guatemala, Gómez, 34, thumbs through pictures he took of the Mississippi River, snowy Midwest winters and gatherings with family and friends. He recalls easier times. “We lived well,” Gómez says under the searing sun. “We could feed our children, pay our bills, and we still had money left over.”

From 2004 to 2008, Gómez and his wife María earned roughly \$7 an hour working at Agriprocessors

Inc., a slaughterhouse and meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa. The money was more than they ever imagined as subsistence farmers back home.

But the family's dream was cut short when United States immigration officials raided the plant in May 2008, arresting hundreds of undocumented Guatemalan workers and deporting them. Now, like more than 100 other families deported after the Postville raid, they struggle to eke out a living back in the economically depressed farming village San José Calderas, some 40 miles (64 km) west of Guatemala City. They grow corn and beans to feed their loved ones and do odd jobs, scraping by on the equivalent of between \$15 and \$30 per month.

View a slideshow of return migrants in Guatemala.



Guatemalans deported from the U.S. file off a plane in Guatemala City. Deportations of Guatemalans from the U.S. have surged in recent years, reaching a record 50,000 in 2013.



“There’s no work, so things are pretty difficult,” Gómez says.

Alongside tens of thousands of his fellow countrymen and women, Gómez is part of a surge in deportations from the U.S. to Guatemala in recent years, with new expulsion records being set annually. Some 50,000 Guatemalans were deported from the U.S. in 2013, up from roughly 40,000 in 2012 and 30,000 in 2011, according to the *Consejo Nacional de Atención al Migrante en Guatemala* (National Council on Immigration—CONAMIGUA).

Many face difficulties finding work when they return to Guatemala, and re-integration is challenging. While the Guatemalan government has created a patchwork of programs intended to re-orient returnees, and the private sector professes a need for their skills, Guatemalans are returning to find a

country little changed from the one they left, rife with violence and devoid of opportunity.

Worse, despite whatever skills many have gained in the U.S., the stigma of being deported and their low levels of education complicate their ability to get a job back home.

You *Can* Go Home Again, Unfortunately

The flood of returning nationals has forced the Guatemalan government to step up efforts to weave former migrants into the complex economic fabric of a country that is struggling to keep pace with a rising population in the face of endemic problems such as low wages and sluggish economic growth—the same factors that originally led many families to seek better lives abroad.

According to the World Bank, Guatemala has one of the region's highest fertility rates (four births per mother), accounting for an annual 2.5 percent growth in population over the past 10 years. That's created one of the youngest countries in the region as well, with roughly two-thirds under the age of thirty.

According to Guatemalan government data, the formal unemployment rate is a low 3 percent. But some 70 percent of the labor force form part of the informal market economy, the government says. Young people in particular have felt the impact of Guatemala's job squeeze. Only 11.4 percent of people age 15 to 29 have had any formal job training, according to a 2011 government youth survey, and the Labor Ministry estimates that 20 percent of Guatemalans age 13 to 24 neither work nor study.

Violence is also holding back Guatemala's economic growth. Experts estimate that Guatemala's GDP growth could reach as high as 4 percent were it not for low productivity and the costs of crime. The country's murder rate of nearly 40 homicides per 100,000 people is one of the highest in the world, according to the United Nations.

It's no surprise that many Guatemalans have sought better opportunities outside their country's borders. According to CONAMIGUA, violence and lack of opportunity force some 200,000 Guatemalans to the U.S. each year. Guatemala also suffers from one of the lowest tax takes in the Americas, forcing the public sector to underspend on education and health, and to neglect small, rural communities.

Migrants' homecomings are often less than joyful. "Even if they find work, they usually make the minimum wage and not a penny more," says Alejandro Gordillo, head of CONAMIGUA. None of Guatemala's 22 departments (states) claim an average salary that is above the country's minimum wage of roughly \$325 per month, Labor Minister Carlos Contreras told reporters in March.

The Government Steps in

In response to these challenges and the influx of returning migrants, CONAMIGUA and the Guatemalan Congress launched a new program in December 2013 called *Bienvenido a Casa*, or Welcome Home. The program aims to enlist the private sector in finding employment for returnees. Under the new initiative, which has already placed dozens of returned migrants into jobs, volunteers from Guatemala's *Asociación de Apoyo Integral al Migrante* (Association of Integral Support for Migrants) help returnees fill out surveys about their work experience in the United States. The

information is plugged into a database available to companies searching for specific skills, such as call centers that need English speakers or banks looking to deal out small business loans to new entrepreneurs.

Guatemala's labor ministry has also beefed up its job listings webpage, hoping to attract returnees as well as potential migrants. Unfortunately, though, officials do not currently have data on how many return immigrants use the site.

But integrating citizens who have been off the grid in Guatemala and the U.S. is not an easy task. Having spent years abroad, many migrants lack essential Guatemalan paperwork upon return, impeding job and school applications and restricting access to microcredit and small business loans from private banks.

"They come back thinking, 'I was undocumented in the United States and now I will be undocumented in my own country,'" says Fanny Molina, a rights activist working to fight human trafficking.

To address the issue, Guatemala's foreign ministry plans to open 11 new consulates this year in key U.S. cities, where migrants can request Guatemalan identification cards and birth certificates, thus easing their return home.

There's also the challenge of where returning migrants ultimately land. Guatemalan Congressman Jean Paul Briere, who helped design the new *Bienvenido a Casa* initiative, worries that the mounting dangers of crossing the border, along with heightened U.S. immigration enforcement that is turning away torrents of migrants, could spur a rush to Guatemala City—a migratory flow the capital is not built to handle.

The population in the department of Guatemala, where Guatemala City is located, grew by 20 percent from 2001 to 2010, making it one of the fastest growing areas in the country.

"Sadly, our government has never had a policy to directly deal with immigration [...] and doesn't have the capacity to generate jobs, development and everything we need so people don't emigrate," Briere said. "Rural people have moved to the city, but the city can't offer any more. The best way to help the city is to develop the rural areas, or the city will collapse in 10 years."

Hoping to facilitate training for returnees, Guatemala's *Instituto Técnico de Capacitación y Productividad* (Technical Institute for Training and Productivity), the nation's principal trade school, has renewed an accord with CONAMIGUA in which the government pays for courses such as car mechanics and computer skills for deported immigrants.

But the new initiatives have been met with skepticism by critics who say the programs are inadequate and that scant political will and red tape will drive returnees into the shadows. That lack of political will may be due to the fact that remittances from Guatemalans residing abroad are a central pillar of the country's economy, accounting for 10 percent of the nation's GDP. In 2013, remittances totaled a record \$5.1 billion.

"This country is built on remittances," said attorney and immigration rights activist Marila de Prinz. "I

think there are a lot of people here who prefer that Guatemalan migrants stay in the U.S. and keep sending money.”

Returnees also distrust authority (for obvious reasons), further complicating efforts to constructively engage and orient them. The inability to collect data from agitated deportees has also hindered recent efforts to assist return migrants. A previous attempt by the Labor Ministry to gather work experience information from returnees never got off the ground, sources said.

During a recent arrival in Guatemala City, 135 deportees filed off a white, unmarked plane and into an immigration room at the country’s air force base. Many shouted out grievances such as “we hate this country” and “there is no work here.”

“The day they return is the worst moment to get information from them,” said Aracely García, a Guatemalan who is executive director of Mexicans and Americans Thinking Together, a binational advocacy group based in the U.S. and Mexico. “They are angry, but not with the United States. They are angry with their own country for forcing them to emigrate.”

The Legacy of Why They Left and How They Returned

Education levels are low in Guatemala, especially in the rural areas where most of the migrants come from. Many Guatemalan companies require the equivalent of one to two years of high school to qualify for a job, credentials that many immigrants don’t have before leaving the country.

José Sica, who never enrolled in high school, is a poignant example. After turning 18, he migrated to the U.S. in 1996. He worked for years as a security guard in Georgia before moving to Los Angeles, where he learned English and opened a store selling and repairing cell phones. But when authorities found him without papers in 2010, he was sent back to Guatemala where he had few friends and no business contacts.

Thinking his U.S. work experience gave him an edge over competing job-seekers, Sica applied to several security companies and cell phone operators in Guatemala, but was consistently turned away because of his low level of education. He believes that he was denied a business license by a number of municipalities where he proposed setting up cell phone shops, and certification as a tour guide, because of discrimination against deportees who, he said, are treated like ex-convicts.

“There are a lot of roadblocks in this country,” Sica said. “When migrants return, we aren’t seen as useful pieces of society. We are seen as criminals.”

Matching Labor Needs with Skills: Not So Easy

Roughly half of Guatemalans residing in the U.S. work either in restaurants or in the service industry. Another 15 percent work in construction.

The Guatemalan Construction Chamber hopes to launch an employment exchange later this year, helping construction companies find Guatemalans with building experience. As part of the program, the chamber has partnered with the International Organization for Migration to collect data from returning migrants, placing candidates with construction experience into jobs. The industry is still

struggling to recover from the 2008 global recession, but hopes to see slight growth in 2014. Construction will account for 2.7 percent of Guatemala's GDP in 2014, according to the Central Bank. But the connection between the needs of returnees and employees is not direct.

While heavy equipment imports have risen as companies look to modernize, and there are classes for carpentry and bricklaying, no Guatemalan trade school offers training on heavy machinery such as bulldozers, said chamber director Paola Van Der Beek. Returning migrants with operating skills will be in high demand, she said, and could earn the equivalent of up to \$4.20 an hour depending on their qualifications—almost double the average wage for construction workers.

The Construction Chamber estimates that 2,000 operator jobs will open up in 2014.

In another attempt to match supply with demand, the Guatemalan government hopes to boost the number of English speakers to support the country's burgeoning call center industry, a sector that is creating around 6,000 jobs annually. Industry insiders say there would be a potential for 12,000 new posts per year if the country had enough English speakers.

"There is always a need for people who speak English [...] and we especially want to promote call centers," said Minister of the Economy Sergio de la Torre. The country's largest call center, Transactel, handles customer support for U.S. companies such as Sprint and TXU Energy.

Almost 20 percent of the Transactel's employees are return migrants, reckons founder Guillermo Montano, who attended military school in Indiana and college in California before returning voluntarily in the 1990s. "Returnees are very capable and not only do they speak English, they know American culture," he said. "Clients love that."

Call centers have become a popular job choice for returnees who migrated north with their parents as young children and attended U.S. schools. Including bonuses, call center employees can earn almost double the country's minimum wage income.

Guatemala, like many countries that are receiving an unexpected and unprecedented flood of returnees, faces the issue of embedding them productively in the local economy. This is not just to dissuade them from attempting the risky return to *El Norte*, but also so that they can contribute to a competitive national economy.

New initiatives such as *Bienvenido a Casa* are promising, and English proficiency always comes in handy. Large, cohesive support systems to reintegrate repatriated migrants are still young and untested. The fact is that the returnees—even assuming a humane, constructive immigration reform in the U.S.—will continue to flow back to their home countries, having gained skills sets and resources that should allow them to contribute to their local economies and societies.

For now, though, neither the national nor local governments have developed the means to do that. Doing so will be key to seizing the advantage of a new reverse migration reality.

Slideshow photos courtesy of the author and Willy Barreno.

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