

Los Indocume

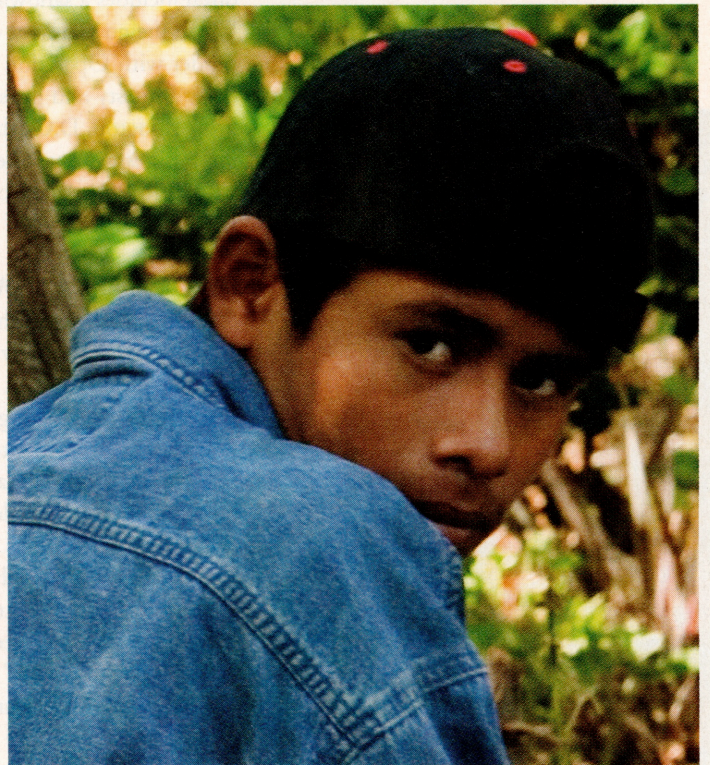


ntados

The quiet, dusty Mexican men who live in the hills and gather on street corners looking for work are a fact of life in San Diego. They perform cheaply — for cash, and other basic staples of life. Whether you consider them working-class heroes or alien lawbreakers, they are our open secret. What should we do about it?

BY KEVIN COX

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SERGIO M. FERNÁNDEZ



WITH THEIR BALL CAPS AND CASUAL CLOTHES, they have the basic fashion accessories to become mall rats. But their indigenous features give them away. They live anonymously in the canyons, but even Gen-X drivers might be forced to acknowledge them when they hold up traffic to cross intersections, on foot or mountain bikes.

Like, they don't have cars?

While the slackers hang out all weekend, the Mexicans do their chores for them. Sweating in the sun. Old-fashioned work.

Get real.



Felix Cruz



Alejandra Ricardez

"I was very careful not to lean on the wall, not to make noise ... We are kinda shy, because we are dirty."

—Felix Cruz

"That's one of the things that bothers me about illegal immigration," says Victor Davis Hanson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. "It's almost like serfs who wait on a ruling class. It doesn't make sense."

In the immigration debate, the illogical arguments stretch for miles, like the border fence, triple or not. There's an even more basic disagreement about what to call the immigrants: illegal or undocumented. It's the perfect talk-show topic in a red-blue world, already polarized by abortion and guns.

Put Juan on the list.

In San Diego, it gets personal. A lot of people know Juan—or José, or Pedro. *Los indocumentados* are an open secret in North County neighborhoods. The all-cash transaction that gets Junior out of yard work often includes a sandwich or spare clothes. While the government cracks down at the border with Operation Gatekeeper or debates amnesty and guest-worker programs in Washington, D.C., the suburbs are open for business. So are the local universities, where professors make careers out of studying immigrants.

MEXICANS ARE A GROWTH INDUSTRY in San Diego. Like biotech.

"They have so many friends," says Jane (not her real name). A Latina with solid-black hair, she is sitting in a Mexican restaurant with her favorite migrant, Ricardo (not his real name). Today, a reporter is buying dinner. Ricardo orders carne asada and eats quickly. Jane says she offers to feed him whenever she sees him.

"I say, 'Did you eat today?' He says, 'Oh yeah, those ones feed me today.' They know so many people."

Jane and Ricardo want to remain anonymous, because they're both breaking the law. For Jane and her husband, who might not pad expense accounts or kick golf balls out of the rough, hiring an undocumented immigrant is more like civil disobedience.

"My goodness, the only reason they're here is so they can support their families," she says. "I personally don't have a problem with that. They're willing to sacrifice themselves, to live in a mountain. In the same way I would help the homeless if they came to my house, I would help them."

Jane met Ricardo 17 years ago, when he came to her North County neighborhood, looking for work. She is from Mexico and speaks Spanish. So does her husband. Their home is like the Mexican consulate for Ricardo.

"Whenever he needs something, he knows he can come here," she says. "If he wants some work, there's always something he can do."

Even after he finishes eating, Ricardo doesn't say much. He smiles a lot, especially when he recognizes other immigrants, who are filling up the restaurant at dinnertime. Like the others, Ricardo is wearing a ball cap, which hides his face as he looks down at his hands. The reporter seems to make him almost as uncomfortable as the Border Patrol, which, he says, has caught him *muchas veces*—many times.

Because of Operation Gatekeeper, it's harder for Ricardo to get back to North County following visits with his wife and children in Mexico. He says it's also more expensive: \$1,000 for a smuggler.

"He knows how to come across, but he can't anymore," Jane says. "The only alternative is to pay these people."

Ricardo, who once divided his time evenly between the United States and Mexico, now stays longer on this side of the border. He's not the only one. At the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UCSD, director Wayne Cornelius quotes estimates of more than half a million Mexicans coming to the United States each year since 2000. That's roughly the population of Seattle. Eighty percent don't have the proper documents, a number that's in-

"I've heard a lot of people say, 'You're breaking the law.' That's such a completely bogus argument to me now."

—Alejandra Ricardez

creased tenfold in more than two decades. Once they get here, he says, they're staying longer.

"Absolutely it is ironic," Cornelius says. "If anything, the policy of border enforcement buildup over the last 10 years has succeeded in bottling the migrants up in the U.S., while not deterring them from coming here in the first place."

Fathers who aren't making round trips to Mexico anymore are bringing their families here, according to Cornelius. "That means more women and children," he says. "Children have to be educated; women and children require more medical services than single males. That automatically is going to increase social service impacts."

The top echelon of political science doesn't even do policy analysis anymore, says Cornelius. "I'm kind of a dinosaur in my own department," he says. "I made a career basically telling politicians what won't work in the immigration area, and they don't like to hear that."

One specific thing the politicians don't like to hear is that they're powerless to control illegal immigration. "This is undisputed," Cornelius says. "It's simply not going to respond to any kind of government intervention that conceivably could be taken."

Not even a triple fence? Earlier this year, the House of Representatives passed a bill to finish the last stretch of it near Imperial Beach.

Cornelius shakes his head. "Yeah," he says, his voice edged like razor wire. "If you stationed machine gunners every 50 yards with orders to kill, that would have a deterrent effect. Within the realm of political feasibility, it isn't going to change. Migration behavior is so deeply ingrained in a culture, in a community that sends these folks and the families. It's such a dense web of transnational ties that no government intervention could undo that."

FROM A FIFTH-GENERATION FARM in California's Central Valley, Victor Davis Hanson has also studied immigration patterns for decades. "I've watched it now for 50 years," he says. "Everything about the illegal aspect of it is bad. It's a quagmire. Every aspect is immoral in some way."

Hanson worked alongside immigrants on the farm until the raisin industry tanked in the early 1980s. Then he taught the classics at Cal State Fresno for 20 years. Hanson also became an author, writing

books about the decline of the small farm.

Two years ago, he published *Mexifornia*, which sharply criticizes all the players in the immigration debate. Hanson calls Mexico a corrupt society, which published a guide for illegal border crossing; encouraging migrants to head north helps prop up the economy when they send back money to their families. Corporations exploit human capital by hiring undocumented immigrants because they don't want union labor and the protection it affords its workers, he says. Social activists need *los indocumentados* to create a perpetual underclass that must be represented, with a cultural identity that must be maintained.

"The average American is in between," Hanson says. "He thinks it's somebody to mow the lawn and clean the pool at cut-rate prices. It doesn't make any sense. When I'm down in your area, I see all these white people sweating in the gym, yet some guy out with a blower, or weeding their garden."

"I don't understand people in San Diego. Why don't they do that for a half-hour, and they'll be getting as much exercise as they would at the gym? Is it the wrong kind of exercise, or what?"

Hanson doesn't look like he has a rapier hidden in his word processor. A photograph on a book jacket shows a middle-aged guy with glasses and a moustache, smiling. But he doesn't believe in political correctness, starting with undocumented immigrants. He calls them illegal aliens.

"They did break the law to come here," he says. "Once you break the law to come someplace, everything's a little different, isn't it? If you have a choice of cash or a check, you'll get money in cash. I've seen figures as high as \$300 billion in lost income-tax revenue."

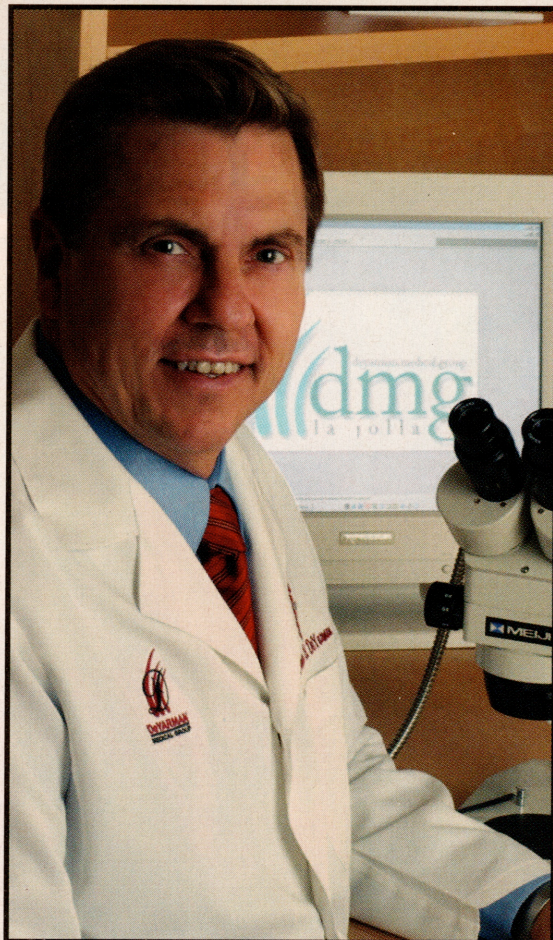
"A lot of people are not paying the full cost of being here. Somebody has to do that when once-healthy workers age and tire, and employers replace them with another cohort of illegal arrivals."

Others, including UCSD's Wayne Cornelius, dispute Hanson's analysis. They say migrants pay consumption-based taxes and create other economic benefits when they start their own businesses. Plus, their off-the-books labor creates a subsidy for consumers by keeping prices low.

But Hanson is unimpressed. "It's not good to have somebody who knows he broke the law," he says. "Almost every oth-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 216





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er decision he makes is predicated on that. He has to live in the shadows. He also knows the law is not sacrosanct anymore."

In *Mexifornia*, Hanson writes about his experiences with this illegality, such as migrants who plow into his vineyard in their cars. It's happened four times.

"They did a total of about \$20,000 in damage and left," he says. "Just ran off. No registration, no license, no insurance. Who pays for the damage? I do. Who pays for the California Highway Patrol officer that comes out, the tow truck? The state does."

California is also on the hook for more than 15,000 undocumented immigrants in its prisons, according to state records. Hanson says they cost the state more than \$450 million a year, adding that the budget for the new University of California campus in Merced, scheduled to open this fall, is about \$25 million.

"Do the math," he says. "You can get almost get 20 new startup UC campuses for money we're spending to put 15,000 in penal institutions. You can't deport them because the Mexican government can't guarantee they won't let 'em go."

"If you're talking about morality, UC Merced, in the San Joaquin Valley, is supposed to be for underrepresented minorities. They really can't get full access to that university because the state's broke, subsidizing a lot of fallout from having illegal immigration."

THE SCHOOLS-VERSUS-PRISONS dilemma is almost as ancient as the classics Hanson once taught. But in a post-9/11 world, security issues get a lot of attention. Earlier this year, the Department of Homeland Security warned Congress about al Qaeda's plans to have terrorists cross the Mexican border—along with all the other undocumented immigrants.

"There's nobody in this debate who can tell you how many felons there are, how many non-Mexicans from the Middle East, how many drug addicts," Hanson says. "Nobody knows; it could be one, it could be 50 today. But it makes little sense to spend bil-

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lions to examine everybody at the airports and have a wide-open border."

UCSD's Wayne Cornelius says that the government doesn't have any documented cases of terrorists crossing the southern border. The only arrest happened six years ago in the Pacific Northwest, when the Millennium Bomber tried to bring explosives through Port Angeles, Washington.

"There are far fewer impediments from the north," Cornelius says. "Common sense would suggest terrorists are not going to risk their lives crossing through the deserts of Imperial County or the mountains of San Diego County. On its face, it makes no sense whatsoever. They can still enter legally on short-term visas, which, of course, is exactly what the 9/11 terrorists did.

"And of course, they can afford to purchase the world's finest false documents."

Cornelius sees another motive for the anti-terrorism twist. "It's the government's favorite rationale, and politicians can't get enough of it," he says. "I see the anti-terrorism thing as an ideal pretext for shoveling more resources into things like border enforcement."

BUT BORDER POLITICS CAN BE TRICKY.

Ask Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Four months ago, he said the federal government should close its border with Mexico. The next day, he apologized by saying the feds should *secure* the border, not close it. Schwarzenegger blamed his poor command of English for the mistake.

Eres bilingüe, Governor?

Longtime Republican strategist Ken Khachigian agrees border enforcement is necessary, but it doesn't address the migrant issue. "I don't think al Qaeda is coming over to pick lettuce, or do some of these chores, the kind of work we're talking about," he says. "If somebody can figure out how to do a bar code at Safeway to count how many diapers you buy, why can't somebody figure out some way to let people come in and out of the country?"

Khachigian, a former chief speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan, shares a certain political pragmatism

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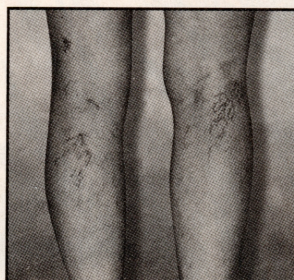
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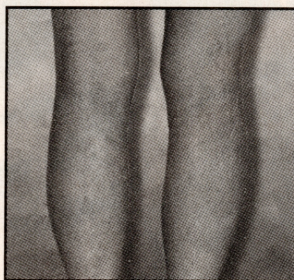
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with his old boss. Khachigian is asked if he supports some sort of guest-worker program.

"Sure, whatever you call it," he says. "Something to that effect."

That pragmatism, plus a sense of humor, drives Khachigian's views on amnesty. "I still haven't figured out how you locate 10 million people and get them out of here," he says. "It's not just finding 'em and shipping 'em out. That doesn't make any sense."

"At the same time, people *can* understand why there's frustration over this issue. The word *immigrant* is preceded by the word *illegal*. We have laws that are being violated routinely. But sometimes I wonder if the critics—on radio stations, in newspapers or in Congress—can vouch for everyone who mows their lawns or cleans their houses."

"There's just a lot of hypocrisy there."

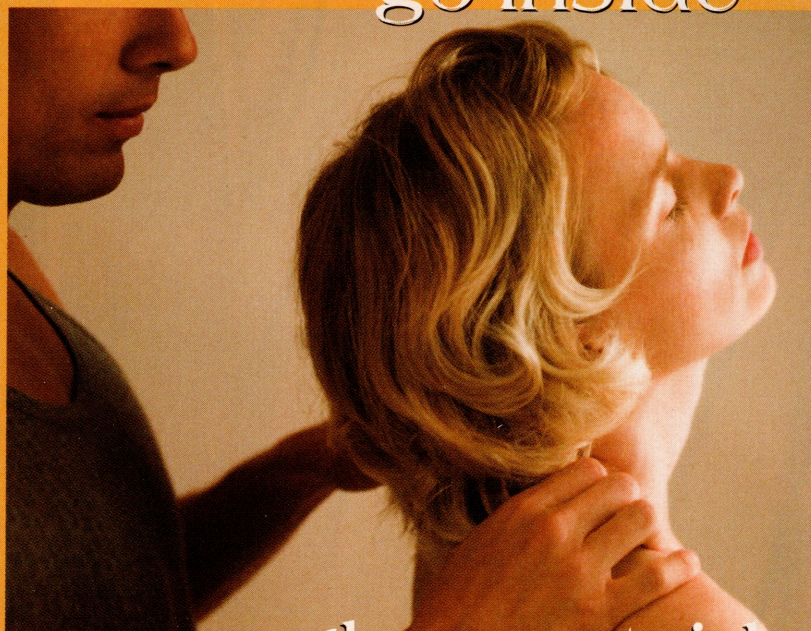
Victor Davis Hanson has his own proposal to end the hypocrisy. He'd offer amnesty to those who have lived here 10 years. But he would stop illegal immigration with border enforcement and stiffer fines on employers who hire undocumented workers.

"There would be a radical change in lifestyle for many Americans," says Hanson, adding that they would have to do menial labor now done by Mexicans. Without migrants working for less money, prices would increase. But so would wages, offering more bargaining power and financial stability to workers.

THERE ARE FORMER MIGRANTS —and their children—who speak perfect English and work in offices around San Diego County. Alejandra Ricardez is planning a mental health program for farmworkers at North County Health Services in San Marcos while she finishes her undergraduate studies at UCLA. Her father, a migrant from Oaxaca who worked in the fields around California, qualified for amnesty the last time Congress approved it in 1986. She's in the process of becoming a permanent resident under the 1990 Family Unity Act.

But she didn't wait for a congressional invitation to immigrate; she

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crossed the border illegally in 1987 to live with her father, whom she had never met. She was 15.

"It was so traumatic," says Ricardez. "It takes so much of your dignity. It took 10 years to be able to think again about that whole experience. I remember walking a lot, overnight, being very, very afraid. I remember the sound of motorcycles, helicopters, flashing light on us. Running around, panicking, not knowing.

"I've heard a lot of people say, 'You're breaking the law.' That's such a completely bogus argument to me now. I have a better understanding of the political, social and economic issues that play into immigration. I'm like 'Please, don't even bring that up.'"

Ricardez is wearing a gray cotton top, with a mass of silver bracelets on one wrist. Her hair is long and straight, below her shoulders. Her lime skirt falls below her knees.

"I went back to my old ways of dressing—decent, nice, not tight," she says. "My grandma keeps talking about how our family values are being threatened so much by this American culture. She says, 'Once you guys learn English, you behave as if you don't care about the family anymore and wear those clothes.'"

Grandma doesn't have to worry about losing Ricardez, though the granddaughter credits her activism in the migrant-rights movement with having the most influence over her wardrobe choices. She is president of the Coalition of Indigenous Communities of Oaxaca.

"I mean, come on, why are we labeling these people with such harshness?" she asks. "Just 200 years ago, a group of foreigners coming to this native land were doing exactly the same thing, looking for the freedom of having a better life. That pushes people from Oaxaca who say, 'I want my family, my kids, not to go through what I've been through. I want my kids to have an education.'"

"I think for people who decide to befriend them, they see that. They forgo the 'alien' label, which is so harsh, I think, particularly in San Diego."

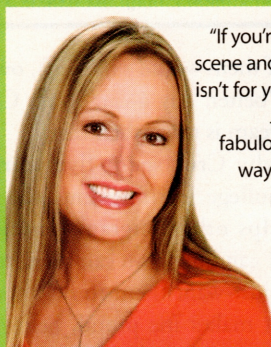
As harsh as it might be in the Unit-

ed States, it's often worse in Mexico for Oaxacans, according to Ricardez. "I actually felt rejection from other parts of Mexico," she says. "They call you a derogatory term—Oaxaquilla. It's one of the things I think is part of the story for indigenous people: racism and rejection.

"Mexico is one of the most discriminatory societies. If you're not wealthy and fair-skinned, you're less than."

But Ricardez is now American enough to complain about taxes while being grateful for the chance to pay them. "I'm single, right?" she says. "I'm contributing a third of my paycheck. Talk about the whole debate, about how immigrants are taking away. What about those of us who are fully participating? I have bought into the whole American [ideal]. You can't find anybody who is more consumerist

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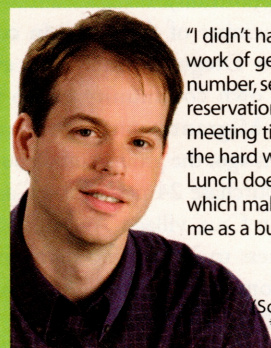
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than I am, who has more belief in the opportunity I have here."

FELIX CRUZ went from working in the fields around Salinas to a job as a production supervisor for a North County cable-TV supply company. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen six years ago, then brought his wife and three children from Mexico. Cruz, wearing a knit shirt and casual pants, arrives at a restaurant for an interview. He arranges his cell phone, day timer and sunglasses on the table. It's the American Dream for other Zapotecs from Cruz's Oaxacán village—Ayoquezco de Aldama, or Place of the Turtle.

throws a party for the migrants in North County. They sit together at folding tables and chairs while a folkloric troupe performs. The male dancers repeatedly lean in for a kiss, but the females always turn away. It's a quaint reminder of village life, without MTV.

A guitarist sings a few songs in Spanish. One describes a boss who is burdened by responsibilities, while the migrant workers are carefree.

"I wouldn't really take what this song tries to say," Cruz says later. "Because if I did that, I'd always be a person not interested in learning and improving life, or anything around me. That's a good song

"Most of them would say, 'Yeah, own a house, live better, buy a car.' But my dream is more than that." —Felix Cruz

"Most of them would say, 'Yeah, own a house, live better, buy a car,'" says Cruz. "But my dream is more than that."

That's why Cruz spent five years at Palomar College learning English, and why he helps other migrants enroll in classes. "If I can do it, you can do it, too," he says. "I just want them to help themselves. That makes me proud, being the person who opened the doors to give them the opportunity."

He's a member of the Oaxacán coalition in San Diego County, and even started his own community group five years ago: Migrantes por Ayoquezco. Four months ago, the group raised enough money to purchase 24 pews for a Catholic church in Cruz' village. And he's starting a business to import food and other products from Ayoquezco de Aldama, to help the village economy.

Cruz also started a troupe to perform traditional Oaxacán dances, complete with costumes. He says he'd seen the routines many times in the plaza of his village, but it was different when he saw a performance at MiraCosta College.

"That was the one that inspired me," he says. "My heart started beating [fast]. I cried. I never thought I would love that, or want to keep it for my kids or my grandkids, or share it with others—until I saw it here."

"That's why those guys in the canyons need this."

The Oaxacán coalition in San Diego

to make others feel comfortable, but that's not solving the problem."

At the end of the evening, an African-American woman sings a spiritual in a rich alto voice, urging the audience to clap along. The migrants, who seemed more engaged in the earlier performances, appear confused by the finale, glancing at each other as the woman sings. When she finishes, she gives one of the men a playful shove, which almost knocks him down.

"That's one of the problems, to get close to them," says Cruz. "The ones that know me, they trust me. If they don't know me, they don't trust me, even if I look the same way they look."

Cruz once lived in the canyons and remembers what it feels like to come indoors. "I was very careful not to lean on the wall, not to make noise," he says. "It includes the way you walk, just to visit a house. We are kinda shy, because we are dirty. That makes us feel like we're going to bother others."

The party is over. Dirt is all over the floor, dark brown against the beige linoleum. Volunteers are cleaning up with brooms and dustpans. The migrants don't see this, because they're outside in the parking lot, hooking up with their rides.

"We got everybody?" someone yells, then gets behind the wheel. The cars head to the canyons. The dream of assimilation glows like a taillight, then recedes in the darkness.

Los indocumentados are going home. ■