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N.C. Jobs A Prime Attraction For Illegal Immigrants From Mexico

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- Efrin Guzman worked 55 hours a week for \$1 an hour at a textile plant in Mexico. At that pay, Guzman says he could never buy a home and move his family of four out of their rented room.

So, along with two of his co-workers, he decided to illegally immigrate to the United States

"We have to cross. You cannot make ... money here," said Guzman, 23, in Altar, Mexico. "Even if they deport us one, two or three times, we'll keep crossing."

Guzman is among the thousands of Hispanic migrants with their sights set on North and South Carolina, where they hope to find ample jobs, better pay, and lack of scrutiny from employers and the government, according to a series appearing this week in The Charlotte Observer.

But the influx of an estimated 390,000 of the nation's 11 million illegal immigrants into North Carolina has created tension, the paper reports. The number of Hispanic gangs is increasing, and public schools and health departments are struggling to accommodate the immigrants.

The newspaper sent two reporters and a photographer to Altar, a town about 60 miles from the Arizona border that thousands of migrants use as a staging area before attempting an illegal crossing. They also observed the U.S. Border Patrol intercept migrants and return them to Mexico, where more than 70 percent of the Hispanic population in North Carolina and South Carolina originates.

Guzman and his friends know they're breaking U.S. law, but with 40 percent of Mexico living in poverty, they said the lure of earning \$7 or \$8 an hour in North Carolina is worth the risk.

"People are searching for a way to live with more dignity," said former Altar Mayor Francisco Garcia. "Immigration is then born of need. (It) is also born of the failure of our own country to meet the needs of the people."

Guzman and his friends left their homes in the industrial city of Puebla, located about 1,200 miles southeast of Altar in early January.

Once there, they found a border guide to lead them on a two-to-four-day journey through the desert. Guzman hired a guide for \$700, more than what he earned in three months at home. Prosecutors and border guards say such guides sometimes abuse migrants and smuggle in drugs.

"A smuggler is going to lie to you. A smuggler is going to leave you behind to die if you fall behind," says U.S. Border Patrol agent Sean King.

Guzman's guide helped them reach Arizona, where they were robbed at gunpoint of \$1,000 and half their food and water by men in ski masks. After walking the desert for two nights, they were discovered by U.S. Border Patrol agents and returned to Mexico.

Guzman, still dreaming of improving the life of his family, said he would cross again.

The Border Patrol, which made 1.2 million arrests last year, won't say how many of those involved repeat offenders. A migrant can be caught and released 20 times before agents file deportation charges, King said. Migrants then risk prison time if they are caught again.

In the Arivaca Valley, a major crossing point in the desert between Altar and Tucson, Ariz., some residents protect their homes with razor-wire fences. Others leave their doors open so migrants can get water.

"Anybody who is hungry, or sick or thirsty _ I'm going to help," says Byrd Baylor, 80, a noted children's author.

Rancher Tom Kay and his wife Dena, who carries a .38-caliber pistol on her hip, worry about drugs creeping in. They take the opposite view.

"There needs to be a wall built. It'll slow (migration) way down," Tom Kay said.

U.S. Attorney Paul Charlton in Arizona believes the U.S. needs a practical solution, one that both enforces and accommodates migrants.

"We need a law that lets them come," he said.

In Washington, illegal immigration continues to haunt politicians. At issue is whether to build more border fences and go after lawbreaking employers, or find ways that will accommodate the flow of migrants.

The U.S. Senate next month is to begin debating President Bush's proposed guest-worker program, which would allow illegal immigrants to sign up to work here legally.

"You cannot stop this with enforcement alone," said King, the border patrol agent.

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