

Life Underground

Originally published in November 2004

It's a bit of a stretch, but try to imagine the following scenario: You're working forty hours a week in a fast-food restaurant, getting by on about \$12,000 a year. Then one day you discover that in Canada there's a shortage of low-skilled workers, and that jobs like yours pay as much per hour as you're making in a day. How long would you keep pinching pennies in the USA, knowing that you could be making \$100,000 a year flipping burgers north of the border? How many other Americans would swallow their pride to make a fortune washing dishes or cleaning hotels in the great white North? And at what point would Canada close its borders against the flood of immigration, forcing resourceful job seekers to find more creative ways of entering the country?

This is the daily reality for thousands of undocumented Latino immigrants in Washtenaw County. Some arrive directly from countries throughout Latin America, while others move here from within the United States. A few have college degrees and are fluent in English; many have little formal education and a very limited understanding of the language. However, most have at least one thing in common - they've come here to seek a quality of life that their home countries cannot provide. Nobody knows how many undocumented Latinos call Ann Arbor home. But legal immigration alone can't account for the dramatic growth in the area's Spanish speaking population. At the U-M Hospitals' interpreter services, Spanish surpassed Chinese and Russian as the most requested language last year. Ann Arbor Public Schools spokeswoman Liz Margolis reports that "the number of Latinos/Hispanics enrolling in the past few years has jumped dramatically."

Last year, in direct response to the flood of immigrants, a group of local volunteers founded Latinos Unidos, Inc. (I currently sit on the group's board of directors.) "Latino immigration isn't just limited to Texas and California these days," explains Cecilia Pozo Fileti, the organization's president. "Because of the higher wages and better quality of life they find here, more and more Latinos are settling in this area, and we expect that trend to continue. "There can be a lot of tension as communities struggle to absorb large numbers of immigrants," Fileti adds. "We organize a variety of initiatives to improve the well-being of Latinos of all socioeconomic backgrounds, helping them adapt to the local community, and vice versa, before these tensions have a chance to emerge in Washtenaw County."

In much of the American Southwest, Latino immigrants face open hostility. In contrast, Latinos Unidos' Festival Latino brings thousands of Latinos and others together each September in celebration of Hispanic culture. "People's response has been overwhelmingly positive," says Fileti. "It reminds us how fortunate we are to be part of such a diverse and tolerant community." Even so, undocumented immigrants struggle to adjust to life in Ann Arbor. There are countless differences to adapt to, from a new culture to a new climate. Factor in the language barrier, and it's easy to see why many

suffer from depression and social isolation. Living illegally in America can take a particularly harsh toll on families. When they first cross the U.S. border, undocumented immigrants usually leave their kids in the care of their spouses or other family members. They may not see them again for months or even years. Once they've gotten established here, many arrange for the rest of their immediate family to join them. They enroll their kids in school and try to live a normal life. Yet they know that if they're found by the immigration authorities, they all could be deported at any time.

For undocumented immigrants, the fear of deportation is a shadow that touches nearly every aspect of their lives. Excluded from mainstream American society, many retreat into their own subcultures. They tend to settle among other Latinos in apartment complexes throughout the county, forming Spanish-speaking enclaves that often have little meaningful contact with the outside community. Most scrupulously avoid contact with police and other representatives of authority. Some are scared to use their real names in health clinics, or even to register their computer software. So when I started looking for local immigrants willing to talk about their undocumented status, the response I got was somewhat less than enthusiastic. It took me several weeks to find some who'd consent to an interview. Naturally, I had to promise not to use their names or the names of their employers in this article. Once they got over their initial nervousness, however, the immigrants I interviewed spoke candidly about their lives in Ann Arbor and about the challenges of living both within and outside the community.

With his round face and shy smile, "Juan" doesn't look like the adventurous type. Yet he risked his life to wash dishes in an Ann Arbor restaurant. Before he left Mexico five years ago, his life was quite ordinary. "I drove a taxicab in Mexico City," he explains in Spanish. "It was a good job. It paid enough to get by." Then Juan's girlfriend, Alicia, got pregnant, and the \$7 a day he earned no longer seemed sufficient. "My brother was living in Ypsilanti then. He told me about the money he was making. I knew my family would never get ahead in Mexico. That's why I decided to cross the border."

Alicia was worried. Between the intense heat, rattlesnakes, and roving groups of bandits, the Mexican border is a dangerous place; each year, hundreds die attempting to cross it. But Juan had no intention of braving the desert by himself—few Latinos do. Instead, he called a "coyote" - a human smuggler who, for a price, shepherds immigrants across the border. Juan was lucky - his coyote also happened to be his neighbor. "He'd crossed the border himself so many times that he got to know everyone in the business, so he finally decided to go into business for himself." So Juan felt confident that he wouldn't suffer the fate of some immigrants, who are robbed, abandoned, and sometimes killed by their coyotes halfway through the desert. Even so, just to be safe, "I paid him half the money in Mexico and half after I got here - thirteen hundred dollars altogether."

Juan's coyote takes groups of fifteen to twenty people each time, once or twice a month. After doing some mental math, I was starting to reconsider my choice of career. "Of course," Juan added, "they don't get to keep all the money themselves. They have to share it with other people along the way." I had pictured a border crossing as a quick and straightforward, if dangerous, affair - a group of immigrants walk through the desert, they

jump a barbed wire fence or ford a river, and then they scatter to seek their fortunes in the USA. The process Juan explained is much more complex, and far more organized. “First we took a bus from Mexico City up to a town along the border. The *polleros* have houses there. That’s where we stayed while we tried to cross.”

A *pollo* in Spanish is a chicken, and *pollero* (pronounced po YAIR oh) translates roughly to “chicken herder.” *Polleros* run safe houses along the border for groups of immigrants trying to get across, and they transport these groups to the crossing points where they’ll begin their walk through the desert. In exchange for these services, the coyotes give the *polleros* a cut of their earnings. Once Juan’s group reached the safe house, the coyote called around to find a guide. Guides know the best crossing points and are familiar with the movements of U.S. immigration agents - *la migra* - a phrase spoken like an epithet in Spanish. “Once your coyote has found a guide, and the guide says the border patrol has passed, the *polleros* drive the group to whatever crossing point the guide recommends,” Juan explains. “They take you at night. They’ve got to be careful, because there are patrols on the Mexican side of the border, too - Mexican police that work with *la migra*. Our first try, we got lost and had to go back. Then we got caught by *la migra* and thrown back. Each time, we went back to the *polleros*’ house, and our coyote had to start making calls again.”

Juan relates all this lightly, with the deliberate nonchalance common among Latino men when they speak of dangerous exploits. But his voice grows hollow as he continues. “The third time we finally got across. It’s something I’ll never forget. We walked for two days. It was so hot our clothes were soaked with sweat, even our pants. We ran out of water before we got there, and had to drink out of a drainage ditch. It was full of mosquito larvae, but we were lucky to have it. I saw bodies there - people who got dehydrated, or who couldn’t withstand the heat.” He pauses and continues. “Our group made it through okay, though a few of the women almost gave up. When we got across, all our feet were covered with blisters. Our legs were raw and bleeding from walking in wet clothes.” On the U.S. side they were picked up by a second group of *polleros*, whom their coyote had notified by cell phone. The *polleros* took Juan’s group to another safe house to rest. The group also washed and changed clothes, Juan says, “so we didn’t look suspicious.” Meanwhile, their coyote got back on the phone: “He was letting people know we’d made it across, and looking for his money.” After a few days’ rest, the group separated and piled into different vans going in different directions. Juan’s van took him all the way to Ann Arbor, dropping off other passengers in towns and cities along the way.

Not all undocumented Latinos brave the southern crossing. Some come legally for short-term visits and move into the underground economy after their visas expire. Others avoid one border in favor of another. “Pedro,” for instance, traveled legally from Costa Rica to Canada before coming to Ann Arbor. “It’s easier to get a Canadian visa than an American one,” he explains. “I went there with a tourist visa, but what I really wanted was to get into the U.S. It’s beautiful here, and the money’s better.” So two years ago Pedro crossed into Detroit from Windsor. “I was with a group of about eight guys. We had a coyote guiding us. Near the border, we waited by the tracks for a train to stop. Then the coyote

told us to climb up under the cars and hide above the wheels. There wasn't much space—we had to squeeze between the wheels and the bottom of the car. Then the train started moving. It took us about fifteen minutes to get through the tunnel—in the dark, praying we wouldn't fall out, with the tracks right below us. Then once we got to Detroit, we had to jump off while the train was still moving.” He shook his head and sighed. “I’ve done a lot of crazy things in my life, but that was the worst.”

Was it worth the risk? “Of course! In my country, you work all day for the same money you can make here in an hour. A person can get ahead here if he tries.” Latinos risk their lives to enter the United States because immigrant workers, with and without documents, have become indispensable to key sectors of our economy, from the food and hospitality industries to cleaning services and construction. “In the local economy, Latino immigrants play a vital role, regardless of their visa status,” says Cecilia Pozo Fileti. “If they weren't here, a lot of businesses would suffer.” Asking business owners about their use of Latino immigrant labor turned out to be an unpopular topic of conversation. Several wouldn't return my calls. One refused to comment and quickly hung up the phone. But when I finally found some who were willing to be interviewed, they raved about their Latino employees. “We’ve got about fifteen Latinos, just in the kitchen—that’s maybe forty percent of our kitchen staff,” says Maggie Long, the corporate chef at Grizzly Peak Brewing Company. “They’re great workers. They rarely ask for time off, and always come on time. They’re just a phenomenal bunch of guys.” Linda Damon, vice-president and co-owner of Weber’s Inn, has similar sentiments about her immigrant employees: “We’ve got forty-two Latino employees currently—that’s eighteen percent of our staff. They’ve been wonderful employees —hardworking, polite, dependable. They’re a real asset to the company.”

Damon has a theory on why so many companies want to hire Latinos. “In general, our Latino employees seem to take great pride in doing the kind of work that people in the U.S. culture don't often value,” she says. “Maybe it's because they make so much less for the same work in their own countries.” Both Long and Damon express confidence that their businesses employ only legal residents. “Weber’s Inn has very strict employment policies,” says Damon. “We check if workers have proper documentation before we hire them, when they fill out the I-9 employment form.” According to Long, the Latino workers at Grizzly Peak “have to fill out the same I-9 form that all employees use. They’ve got to show their passport or driver’s license, green card, and Social Security card to work here.” Whether all those documents are genuine is another question. “There really aren't many ‘undocumented’ Latinos in Ann Arbor,” Juan explains. “Almost everyone I know has documents. It's just that the documents are fake.”

Although some local businesses will hire workers without visas, it's risky to knowingly violate U.S. immigration law. And when businesses are aware of their workers' undocumented status, they tend to offer lower pay and harder working conditions, knowing that illegal workers aren't in a position to complain. That's why all the undocumented Latinos I spoke to have *papeles chuecos* - counterfeit documents. Getting documents was the first order of business for “Roberta” when she arrived in Ann Arbor four years ago. A plump, chatty Guatemalan in her early forties, she came here to

join relatives who had settled in the area years before. “Right after I got here, my brother took me to Mexicantown [in southwest Detroit], and we hung around outside a grocery store. A lot of guys were standing around, and we asked some of them where we could buy papeles. “One of them took us back into an alley. He took my picture with an instant camera and wrote down my name and birthdate. He said he’d meet us in a few hours. We went and had lunch, and two hours later he came back with the cards. He charged me a hundred and twenty dollars, which seemed like a lot of money then.” The investment paid off, however—a few weeks later, Roberta was working full time as a maid. “I don’t know if [her employers] know our documents are fake. The cards look the same as real ones—the green card has your real name and photo on it, and the Social Security card is in your name,” she says. “When we apply for a job, they just ask to see our documents, and we show them. But I guess they probably know, because our Social Security numbers don’t match our names.” Does she know where the fake numbers come from? “Maybe they’re made-up numbers, or from dead people or retired people,” she offers. “You’d have to talk to the guys that make the cards.”

Somehow I doubted that any of Mexicantown’s counterfeiters would initiate me into the secrets of their profession. But wherever the numbers come from, the Social Security cards seem to work well enough. The Social Security Administration currently has hundreds of billions of dollars in its “earnings suspense file,” thanks in part to the millions of undocumented immigrants who pay Social Security taxes but never collect benefits. Still, when I tell Linda Damon about the widespread use of counterfeit papers, she seems surprised. “I had no idea about the false-document business. If we ever found out about someone using false papers, we’d dismiss them immediately.” Afterward, she consults with the financial staff at Weber’s. According to Damon, the company comptroller says “that she can usually catch false papers before a hire, because not all documents will agree in name or photo, et cetera.”

But it seems this seldom happens - none of the immigrants I interviewed mentioned any difficulties in using forged documents to get a job. Employers are required to check documents only for new hires. In fact, they’re forbidden to check these documents again later—such treatment can constitute unlawful discrimination. Each year the SSA sends “no match” letters to companies that send in taxes for employees whose names and Social Security numbers don’t agree with its records. But employers are not legally permitted to fire, suspend, or take any “adverse action” against the workers who are identified in them. Since discrepancies in names and Social Security numbers may occur for legitimate reasons among legal workers (particularly when foreign names are involved), it’s up to the workers themselves to resolve the misunderstanding directly with the SSA. I ask Maggie Long whether Grizzly Peak has ever received a no-match letter. “Yes, the corporate office gets them occasionally,” she says. “We’ve had a handful of guys who couldn’t fix the situation, and they’ve quit on their own. But we have to take the documents our employees show us at face value. As an employer, we don’t verify our employees’ numbers—that’s between them and Social Security.”

According to the SSA, if an employee doesn’t rectify the matter, the agency’s only response is to send another letter the following year. Even so, several people I

interviewed had walked out of good jobs the moment a no-match letter arrived, convinced that *la migra* was following close behind. “I couldn’t take the risk,” one explains. “My family depends on the money I send back to Mexico each month.” Others are raising children here, some of whom are American citizens. “If they deported me, I don’t know what my kids would do,” one woman says. “They were born here. They don’t want to leave their country, their friends.” Many came here from the Southwest, where immigration raids are common; both government agents and armed vigilantes frequently apprehend Latinos near the border. Although raids are far less common here, rumors that they’re about to happen spread panic periodically throughout the local undocumented community. Still, compared to many places, Ann Arbor is a relatively safe haven for undocumented immigrants. For many of the Latinos I spoke to, that’s what they like best about the city.

I arrange my last interview through a Salvadoran friend, “Felipe,” who obtained a green card through a government program that offered legal status to refugees of his country’s war. Although he’s no longer undocumented, many of his friends are, and he convinces a group of them to meet us at a local cafe. Most are in their mid-thirties and have been living in Ann Arbor for several years. One woman, with wide eyes and a very mistrustful expression, arrived just two months before. Some are raising children here and have no plans to leave. Others want to save money for a few years and then go home and buy property, or start a business. Felipe is the only one who speaks English. I start asking them questions one by one, but the interview soon accelerates into a heated discussion. Though all are grateful for the chance to make a decent living in Ann Arbor, they are cynical about their place in this community. “We pay Social Security taxes here, but we’ll never see that money,” one says. “That’s why this country lets us work here - the government’s making money off us.”

Another complains about the common stereotypes of undocumented immigrants. “People see us here and they think we’re taking the gringos’ jobs. But my position was open for four months before they hired me. Nobody here wanted it—it’s too much hard work. If a job doesn’t involve computers, people here don’t want it.” At the same time, they all love the comfort and cleanliness of Ann Arbor, and they’re amazed by the area’s natural beauty. One marvels at the peace and quiet: “Nobody honks their horn, even in heavy traffic. Everyone’s so polite. In my country, you can’t imagine the noise at rush hour.” But others find the city *too* quiet: “Back in our countries, you work all day, then go home, and people are out in the street, playing soccer, talking, dancing. Here there’s not the same sense of community. People go home from work and sit in front of their TVs. You barely know your neighbor. If you want to play a sport somewhere, you have to join a club, register, and pay a fee. It’s all too structured - too many rules.”

Many echo that complaint. “There are too many rules here, not enough freedom.” They speak with a certain defiant pride about the ways undocumented Latinos have managed to subvert those rules to make a living. Some are clearly gratified by their ability to take something back from a country that has had its way with the hemisphere for centuries. As one puts it, “If the U.S. has enough money to finance wars in Latin America, it has enough money to share with the immigrants displaced by those wars.”

I've known a lot of Latinos, and have heard many of these criticisms before, but I am taken aback by how negatively this group views Ann Arbor. Taking the lead is "Julia," a vivacious woman from El Salvador whose voice rises as she speaks. "The other kids at school call my son a wetback, and he was born here!" she exclaims. "He's an American citizen, just like them. A Latino here could speak perfect English and be a doctor or a professor at the university, but if someone sees him on the street they'll probably call him a wetback too. People here don't accept us because we're foreigners, and we're not white." She pokes her finger at me. "If you and I stood out in the street and asked passersby for help, I guarantee they'd help you, but they'd ignore me! In my country people accept each other, no matter what their color. If I could support my kids there, I'd leave this country tomorrow and never come back!"

I feel defensive and a bit sad. I hadn't expected such a brutal assessment of my city. Is there a hidden streak of intolerance within this mecca of diversity? Or is their anger the natural frustration of an isolated community, tired of living underground? Has Ann Arbor rejected them, or have they rejected Ann Arbor? Is there is any point in trying to build bridges between two communities that seem so far apart? Felipe, noticing that I have gone quiet, seems to feel the need to explain. "Listen," he says in English, "they're just frustrated. They want a lot of things that can never be, because they don't have a voice in this country. Their lives here are so limited, and to them this country just doesn't make much sense."

I start to describe all the beautiful things they could discover here, the friendships waiting to be made, if only they could move beyond those limitations and take part in the wider community. But I'm speaking in English, which no one else here understands. Julia is watching us reproachfully, and tapping her foot. Before Felipe can answer, she slaps his arm impatiently and says, "Habla español, chico."