

# MEXICO

## IMAGE vs. REALITY

With Donald Trump pledging to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, a look at why fewer Mexicans are leaving home in search of opportunity

BY SEAN MCCOLLUM AND PATRICIA SMITH



Peering through the U.S.-Mexico border fence in Tijuana, Mexico

In some ways, Oswaldo Valencia Rosado embodies the new Mexico. Twenty-five years ago, his grandfather ran a meat stall in the market of Campeche, a city on the Yucatan peninsula. Now Rosado, 27, is studying for a Ph.D. in computer programming in the central Mexican city of Puebla, with hopes of someday starting his own video game production company.

When Rosado graduated from high school, he thought about going to the United States, which generations of Mexicans have

seen as the promised land, to continue his education. But his dad advised him to build a career in Mexico instead.

"That's a waste," his father said of going to the U.S. "Stay here!"

Rosado did stay, and he's not alone. Mexico's improving economy is giving more Mexicans opportunities at home, and fewer are heading to the U.S. illegally in search of jobs. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of undocumented Mexicans in the U.S. dropped from 6.4 million in 2009 to 5.8 million



in 2014, the latest year for which figures are available.

Even so, when many Americans think of Mexico, the first thing that comes to mind is illegal immigration. About half of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. are Mexican, and the debate over how to deal with them is playing a big role in the 2016 presidential election. Republican candidate Donald Trump has made headlines for suggesting that undocumented immigrants from Mexico are criminals and promising, if elected, to build a huge wall to seal the entire 2,000-mile border—and to make Mexico pay for it. Hillary Clinton favors immigration reform that would provide those in the U.S. illegally with a path to citizenship.

The fact that Trump's campaign promise has resonated with many Americans is an indication of the frustration people feel with a broken immigration system, experts say. But they add that it's also based on a somewhat outdated vision of Mexico and its relationship with the U.S.

"Americans still have a picture of Mexico as a guy in a sombrero lying under a cactus, and Mexico hasn't been that for a long time," says Christopher Wilson, a Mexico expert at the



Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. "The country has transformed dramatically over the last 30 years."

Mexico has made huge progress in pulling people out of poverty. Almost half of Mexico's 31 million households are now considered middle class. High-skill jobs are becoming more plentiful, factories are churning out sophisticated products, and more families are adopting lifestyles that would be familiar to American families, with cellphones, new cars, and nice homes.

### From Making T-shirts to Building Airplanes

The country has also begun to emerge as an international player in exports and manufacturing. In addition to growing a lot of the food Americans eat, Mexico produces cars, parts for the U.S. auto industry, electronics, appliances, and clothes. And Mexico has become one of the world's largest exporters of computer services like IT support, along with countries like India, the Philippines, and China. Overall, it now ranks as the 12th-largest export economy, and it's expected to continue to grow.

"Mexico has gone from a place where you make T-shirts and jeans to a place where you make cars and airplanes," says Wilson. "That's a tremendous evolution of the economy."

Mexico's growing economic clout has big implications for its northern neighbor, the United States. Mexico is the third-largest trading partner of the U.S. (after Canada and China). Since the start in 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—which opened up trade between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada—Mexico's exports have soared, with more than 80 percent going to the U.S. As a result of NAFTA, \$1.4 billion of trade is conducted back and forth between the two nations every day, according to Kimberly Breier, a Mexico expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Trump has called NAFTA "the single worst trade deal ever approved in this country." He says it caused the loss of millions of good-paying American manufacturing jobs when



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**—LUIS ENRIQUE SERRATO PÉREZ, 16**



American companies moved those jobs to Mexico, where wages are much lower. Trump says he will pull out of the deal “in a split second” if its terms aren’t made more favorable to the U.S. Clinton has said the U.S. needs to renegotiate NAFTA to better protect American workers, but she supports free trade because she believes it expands U.S. exports and encourages economic development.

### Cartels & Corruption

Given the harsh rhetoric about Mexico in the campaign, it’s no surprise that Mexicans have been following it closely. Many were outraged when Trump visited Mexico in late August to meet with President Enrique Peña Nieto, who opposes Trump’s plan to build a border wall.

“The fact that a lot of Americans are supporting him is what is worrying to me,” says Isabela Di Le Court Mebarak, a 20-year-old college student in Mexico City.

“The fact that America is attempting to stop Mexican immigration, I understand that,” she adds. “I understand as well that much of the hard work done in the U.S. was done by Mexican workers.”

Despite Mexico’s substantial progress in creating economic opportunity at home, the country faces major challenges, including persistent poverty that’s still driving some Mexicans to cross the border illegally. Of Mexico’s 122 million people, 55 million—about 46 percent—live in poverty.

“The middle class has grown, but people at the bottom in terms of income and education haven’t reaped the benefits,” says Lucrecia Santibañez, a professor at Claremont Graduate University in Los Angeles.

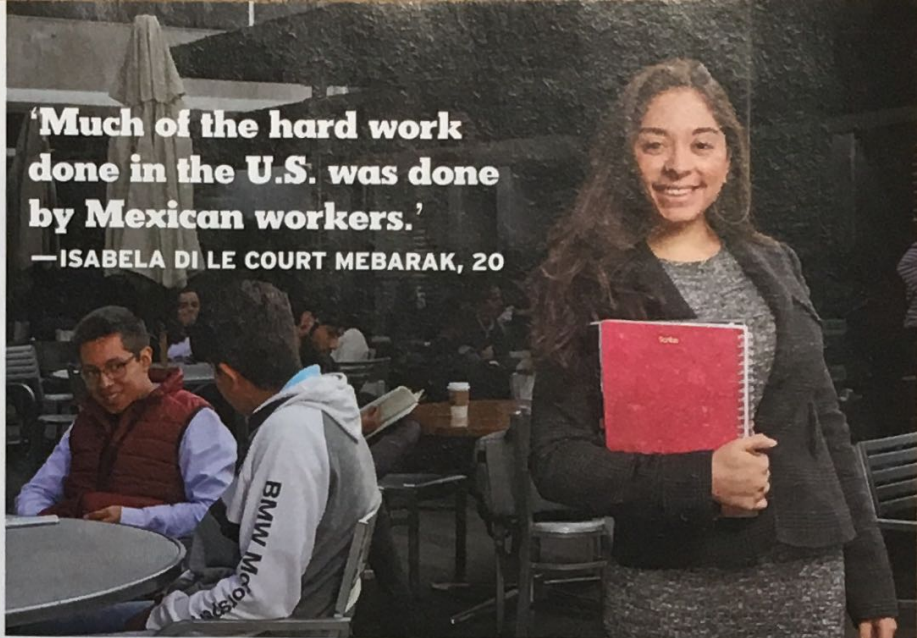
Powerful drug cartels run a \$30 billion illegal drug trade, with most of those drugs going to customers in the United States. Drug cartels also control large swaths of territory, routinely paying off police and government officials to look the other way. At all levels of government and business, corruption is a persistent problem. And Mexico’s public education system is in need of major reform.

Only 45 percent of Mexicans finish high school on time, compared with 82 percent of American kids. Although elementary schools exist in every village, for some students, continuing beyond sixth grade requires traveling long distances. The costs of uniforms, school supplies, and transportation strain poor families, and many schools lack computers and even basic supplies like paper.

Teacher quality is often poor. And there’s no government financial aid for college, no matter how promising a student’s academic performance.

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**81%**

Percentage of Mexico’s exports that go to the U.S.

**\$17,500**

Per capita GDP in Mexico, compared with \$55,800 in the U.S.

**\$1.4 billion**

Value of trade conducted daily between the U.S. and Mexico

That’s the problem facing Luis Enrique Serrato Pérez, a 16-year-old from the southern province of Michoacán. Luis Enrique is in his third year of high school in the village of Santa Clara del Cobre. Math is his favorite subject, and he receives top grades in his class of 37 students.

“I would love to have a career as a math teacher,” he says. “But you have to have connections.”

And money. His father, a taxi driver, probably won’t earn enough for Luis Enrique to pursue the degree he would need or to pay the necessary bribes to smooth his way to a teaching job.

Luis Enrique still remembers the day two years ago when his father, who had lost his job, left for Tijuana, where he planned to illegally cross into the U.S. His dad’s sister and her family were living illegally in Los Angeles and the prospect of American jobs beckoned. But his father’s plan for crossing the border fell apart, and he returned home.

Stepped-up U.S. border patrols and an improving Mexican economy have convinced many Mexicans to stay, and most experts expect the number of undocumented Mexicans in the U.S. to continue to decline if Mexico’s economy keeps growing.

### ‘On the Right Track’

But for that to happen, Mexico will have to find a way for young people like Luis Enrique to succeed. Oswaldo Valencia Rosado, the computer science graduate student, is glad he stayed in Mexico to pursue his dreams, but he’s aware that not all Mexicans are as lucky as he’s been.

“Big cities have seen a quick transition and a lot of new opportunities. They have services comparable to developed nations,” he says. “But about half the country doesn’t have access to the new opportunities.”

Still, Rosado sees reason for optimism, and he has a message for Americans who believe otherwise. “We are on the right track,” he says. ●