

After life in U.S., migrant children struggle with return to Mexico

People and places are unfamiliar, and some feel sting of discrimination.

By [Jeremy Schwartz](#)

MEXICO CITY BUREAU

Monday, October 06, 2008

CIUDAD HIDALGO, Michoacn — After nearly seven years in the United States, Edgar Gutiérrez was back in a hometown he hardly recognized.

Returning as a 16-year-old, Gutiérrez found relatives he couldn't remember. Kids thought he was stuck up because he had lived in the U.S. Teachers scolded him when he pronounced his name with an American accent.

Gutiérrez had spent his early life in these mountains of Central Mexico, but now he felt like a stranger.

Officials in Mexico say he and his family, who lived for years in Atlanta, are among a rapidly growing number of undocumented immigrants moving back to Mexico to start over. Some are drawn by a desire to return home after meeting their financial goals; many more are pushed by the faltering U.S. economy.

In their hometowns, mostly in rural Mexico, they find the same grinding poverty that originally drove them out. Returning migrants face a gantlet of challenges, from finding a job to reconnecting with family and friends.

But experts say the burden falls most heavily on the children who spent their formative years in American schools, watching American TV, wearing American clothes and listening to American music.

They are returning to a homeland they know mostly through stories and photos. Some speak no Spanish. Others speak both Spanish and English with an accent.

For most, the biggest challenge is adapting to a different educational system.

"What happens is, the kids stop studying because (the adjustment) becomes too hard and there is no one helping them," said Arturo López, who runs the municipal migrant aid office in Ecatepec, a suburb of Mexico City.

Gutiérrez struggled at his new school in the state of Michoacán. His English teacher sent him to the principal's

office when he corrected her pronunciation. He couldn't understand the Spanish terms in his science class so he found translations on the Internet.

It was a long way from high school in Atlanta, where he was in Junior ROTC and dreamed of joining the U.S. Navy.

Eventually, the strain became too much, Gutiérrez said. He quit school and spent his days in his new neighborhood of unfinished concrete homes and dirt streets.

Though no precise figures exist for the unfolding phenomenon, officials in states including Michoacán and Zacatecas are warning of an impending flood of returnees.

"There's no work for them (in the U.S.) so they figure it's better to come back to their own country," said Griselda Valencia Medina, secretary of immigration for the state of Michoacán. "As bad as it is here, they at least have a place to live and to eat."

In Obrajuelo, a tiny farming village in Guanajuato state, Lourdes Pérez has just returned to her hometown after six years in Austin. Her 8-year-old daughter, who finished first grade at Odom Elementary in South Austin, is getting back to normal after the initial shock of the move, she said. Her 6-year-old son keeps asking when they are going back.

Pérez said she returned because it became increasingly hard to find a job as an undocumented worker.

"It's slow (in Austin) for everything — restaurants, construction, everything," she said.

Pérez said she feels a little shellshocked herself but said she's concentrating on enrolling her children in school, something that's turning into more of a bureaucratic problem than she expected.

Other parents also say they face discrimination.

Omar Martínez, 32, said school officials refused to enroll his 4-year-old son, who was born near Oakland, Calif., at a kindergarten in Ecatepec.

"They said they don't want foreigners," he said.

Martínez and his brother, Ivan Martínez, returned to Mexico over the summer, moving their families when their mother fell gravely ill. Both said they spent weeks trying to find schools that would accept their children, ages 4 to 13. They eventually found a welcome from Cinco de Mayo elementary school and Principal Patricia Cervantes.

Cervantes said the school has taken in several migrant students over the past few years and strives to give them extra attention. "It's our job to help them integrate into society," Cervantes said.

But experts say the situation shows how ill-prepared most Mexican schools and other government entities are for the expected flow of returning migrants.

"The authorities know that the migrants are the ones that help the country the most (through sending money home), but then they don't help them when they come back," López said.

In Michoacán, where it's estimated that a quarter of the population has migrated to the U.S., officials are scrambling to put together economic plans to deal with the potential return of thousands to rural areas.

Back in Ciudad Hidalgo, Gutiérrez, now 17, has decided to return to school. After initially being

overwhelmed by the move to Mexico, he said he's determined to make the most out his new beginning.

He said he didn't go out much at first but now attends dances and plays soccer with new friends and long-lost cousins.

He's also reconnecting with grandparents who didn't recognize him when he returned.


But Gutiérrez said he still feels caught between worlds.

"It's like ... a new life. Everything is new. New friends, new neighborhood. It's hard to come back."

Vote for this story!

Find this article at:

<http://www.statesman.com/search/content/news/stories/world/10/06/1006returnkids.html>

 **Click to Print**

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.