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Way North of the Border

By [EDUARDO PORTER](#) and [ELISABETH MALKIN](#)

ST. PAUL - At first blush, [Mexico's](#) newest American consulate might appear out of place. Far from the Mexican border, this prosperous state capital, along with Minneapolis and the surrounding suburbs, form a sprawling metropolis with Scandinavian overtones.

Yet by the time the Mexican government opened its 46th consulate in the [United States](#) here in June, it was already a latecomer to a bustling Mexican-American community that includes, according to consular officials, 22 churches offering services in Spanish, 9 Spanish-language newspapers, 3 tortilla makers and 9 Hispanic - mostly Mexican - soccer leagues.

"We are responding to the needs of the Mexican community," said Nathan Wolf, the new consul. "We are just following the movement of people."

The location of Mexico's latest American consulate provides a stark illustration of how economically improving groups of Mexican immigrants are establishing themselves across the country, in ways that experts say point to the futility of current attempts to plug the border and stem the flow of illegal migrants in search of a better life.

[Indeed, while overall migration to the United States peaked in 2000, according to a new study by the nonpartisan Pew Hispanic Center, the number of illegal immigrants - mostly from Mexico - rose sharply last year after three years of decline that started with the 2001 recession.]

When the governors of [New Mexico](#) and [Arizona](#) declared states of emergency in August and called on the federal government to help stop the tide of illegal immigrants coming across the border, their move did nothing to interrupt the consulate's busy preparations to start four Mexican "hometown associations," linking immigrants with their home states.

"They call Minneapolis the new Axochiapan," said Ramiro Hernández, a successful businessman who arrived in the United States illegally 20 years ago from Axochiapan, a small town in the central Mexican state of Morelos. "Ninety percent of the population there has people over here. Kids come here as soon as they come of age."

The 2000 census recorded 41,600 Mexican-born people in [Minnesota](#), up from 3,500 counted in 1990. Locals in Minneapolis say that new arrivals have multiplied even faster over the last five years, coming from Mexico and from Mexican hubs in the United States, notably Chicago. "We think there are around 200,000," Mr. Wolf said.

A strong local economy helps pull Mexicans from steamy Morelos to the chilly Minnesota plain. The state's unemployment rate is among the lowest in the nation; at 3.3 percent, the jobless rate for Minneapolis-St. Paul is the lowest among big metropolitan areas. The forces driving migrants into the United States are even broader, however, and are increasing the supply of working-age Mexicans willing to do whatever it takes to cross the border.

"Immigration trends are virtually unaffected by spending on border enforcement," said J. Edward Taylor, a professor at the University of California, Davis, who has surveyed migrants in Mexico about their experiences. "It means the things driving migration are too big to be counteracted by enforcement."

Demography plays the biggest role. The Mexican government projects that the 11- to 40-year-old population - the prime age for migration - will continue to grow over the next decade, by roughly 6 percent, to 59 million people, before starting to decline over the subsequent 35 years as Mexico ages.

Economic dynamics also contribute to the flow. Mexico's backward rural economy, which produces only 5 percent of Mexico's output but employs more than a fifth of its labor force of 40 million, is poised to remain a plentiful source of migrants.

"There's an unexpectedly high share of workers still in agriculture," Professor Taylor said. "That's like a fault line."

While Mexican demographics are pushing, American demand for cheap labor is pulling just as hard. Gordon H. Hanson, an economics professor at the University of California, San Diego, argues the immigration boom of the last 20 years resulted from two factors: the growth in the Mexican working-age population and the decline in high school dropout rates in the United States, which reduced the domestic supply of low-skilled workers. "It was a match made in heaven," he said.

A Mexican government agency, the National Population Council, forecasts that about 400,000 Mexicans will migrate to the United States every year for the next decade and that the flow should then decline gradually to an estimated 325,000 a year by 2050. Jeffrey S. Passel, a demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center, argues that at least in the near term, even this estimate seems low.

To try to stem the flow, the United States government has increased annual spending on border policing in the last 10 years by more than fivefold in real terms. The Border Patrol has swollen to 10,000 agents, equipped with sensors and cameras, planes and drones.

Yet if the border has become tougher, so, too, have migrants. These days, only a third make it into the United States on their first try, according to a survey by the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies of the University of California, San Diego. But 59 percent make it across on their second to fifth attempts. Only 8 percent give up and go home.

"Once I was caught five times," said Arnulfo Pliego, 44, a migrant from Axochiapan who first came to the United States in 1989 and has shuttled between Morelos and Minnesota for the last nine years. "I said to myself, 'I must pass, I must pass,' and I passed."

From 1991 to 1994, some 450,000 illegal immigrants were coming to the United States annually, mostly from Mexico. In the first four years of this decade, the average exceeded 600,000, according to the Pew Hispanic Center report.

Mr. Passel estimates that the Mexican-born population in the United States has swollen to 11 million people, some 60 percent of them here illegally. "If you look at the numbers," he said, "it seems that anybody that wants to get in does."

Indeed, the stepped-up border policing is deterring immigrants from returning home and encouraging them to settle in the United States indefinitely. Meanwhile, the sheer numbers provide new incentives to migrate, as strong networks of immigrants emerge, linking communities on both sides of the border, making migration somewhat easier and effectively transforming it to a routine.

Consider Rosalba Cano. When she followed her husband north, leaving Axochiapan with her 2-year-old child 10 years ago, there were very few of her compatriots in Minneapolis. "I only came because my husband said he was leaving and wouldn't be back in a while," said Ms. Cano, 33, a former preschool teacher. "I was all alone here for a long time."

But then one of Ms. Cano's sisters arrived, followed by her brother and a couple of cousins. She now has three

uncles in town. Ms. Cano's husband, Osvaldo García, a former farmworker from Axochiapan, has two brothers and two sisters living in the Twin Cities.

The latest arrival is Ms. Cano's sister-in-law, Obsidiana Enríquez Navarro, 25, who quit her job with the Axochiapan municipal government last year, paid a smuggler \$2,000 to get her across the border, then trudged through the Arizona desert before catching transportation to Minneapolis.

There are so many men from Axochiapan in the area that the village priest came to visit. "Father Miguel came to look for the husbands and take them back, but he didn't manage to get any," Ms. Enríquez Navarro said.

Migration is leaving a deep mark on Axochiapan, a county seat at the center of a cluster of villages with a population of some 30,000. In one village, Quebrantadero, people talk of closing the primary school because there are so few young children left.

In Tlalayo, another village, the streets are paved and lined with two-story concrete houses, the product of a construction boomlet financed by remittances from the United States. But with crop prices low and government subsidies limited, the traditional agricultural economy has withered, leaving only elderly men to till the fields.

Municipal officials in Axochiapan estimate that at least a third of the population has moved. The mayor wants to honor the migrants with a 10-foot statue of a man carrying a bag and leaving his wife and two children behind. That may seem paradoxical but he has his reasons.

"I realize that Mexico has moved ahead thanks to remittances," said the mayor, Leopoldo Rodríguez Galarza. "In part, they have helped reduce poverty."

The human flow is changing the Twin Cities, too. East Lake Street in Minneapolis, formerly gang-ridden and drug-infested, has become a lively Mexican commercial center.

Mr. Hernández, who is now a legal resident in the United States, first went into business bringing in Mexican cuts of meat like the salt-cured cecina steak and the heavily spiced pork al pastor from Chicago, and Mexican videos he bought from a bankrupt Blockbuster in [California](#).

He now owns several jewelry shops, a money remittance business, three cowboy-wear stores and a video-rental shop. He is a partner in a local Spanish-language radio station and a supermarket.

And in an echo of the planned Axochiapan monument, he is working with other local community leaders to persuade the governor of Morelos to donate a statue of Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary hero.

These cross-border connections have become so strong, officials say, that nothing is likely to stop Axochiapan's citizens from continuing to seek jobs in the Twin Cities.

In the Cano-García household, Mr. García earns \$15 an hour driving a dump truck for a landscaping business and Ms. Cano makes \$11 an hour as a supervisor at a taco grill. It is money they could never dream of earning in Mexico.

With two more children, they now own a house, a small duplex in a leafy neighborhood across from a park. The state government has provided extensive help to care for their second son, who is autistic.

"I am very happy with Minnesota," Ms. Cano said. "I have done very well here. It's the best for the future of my children."

Meanwhile, the Mexican government is making plans for its next consulate. According to Mr. Wolf, it should open in Little Rock, Ark., before the end of the year.

Eduardo Porter reported from Minnesota for this article, and Elisabeth Malkin from Axochiapan, Mexico.