

## Passports to the American Dream: Mounting Debt, Few Opportunities Keep Guatemalans Coming

Perla Trevizo in *Arizona Daily Star, La Estrella Tucson*

### Inequality and Poverty

Income inequality in Guatemala ranks among the highest in the hemisphere, according to USAID, especially when it comes to indigenous communities most affected by the country's armed conflicts.

While about 60% of the nation's population lives in poverty, in Huhuetenango it's nearly three-quarters.

At 46.5%, Guatemala has the worst chronic malnutrition rate in the hemisphere and the sixth-worst in the world — and it soars to 58% for the indigenous population.

Just to reach these villages takes more than 10 hours from the capital. The reason isn't the distance, but the narrow, winding roads full of potholes.

There are no major hospitals, few schools and limited access to food.

Money comes mostly from the outside. In 2018, Guatemalans received more than \$9 billion from relatives living abroad, mostly in the U.S.

Over time, communities became reliant on remittances. They came to believe the only way to achieve a higher standard of living was to send someone north.

“Any person's dream is to have home, a car, land and to live, perhaps not too comfortable, but to have the basics,” said Mateo Domingo Lucas, a school principal in Bulej.

“And that's the dream of the youth; the children, too, are starting to say, ‘I'm going to leave.’ They say you live better, eat better. They say you can buy a pair of shoes,” he said. “Fighting against that dream, to try to convince them to stay, is challenging.”

Some of the departments (Guatemalan states) with the highest poverty or malnutrition rates are also those where a lot of migrants are coming from.

Since January, Lucas' school of 600 students has lost more than two dozen of them. The desks continue to empty out, and the void is felt in each classroom.

The pressure increases as each new concrete home rises — some are as expensive as \$50,000 — gradually closing in on the few remaining wooden shacks. Every time another goes up, families want one even more.

“The block fever,” co-writes Lizbeth Gramajo Bauer, an anthropologist at Rafael Landívar University, “it’s a symptom, effect and cause of migration.” Migration, she says, leads to more migration.

Catarina Domingo’s husband, Pedro Paez, hadn’t left before because he didn’t want to die in the desert. What would she do with five children and no husband?

“I didn’t want to be apart from my children, but it’s because of the need,” she said in broken Spanish. “Because we have no land, we have no money to build a house.”

Her home is one of the few remaining in Yalambojoch made out of wood with tin roofs and dirt floors.

Paez left recently with their 9-year-old daughter, Olga. He called six days later and Olga sounded happy, Domingo said. They were in Tennessee after spending three cold nights in a Border Patrol station and then at a church, where they were given a warm meal and a shower.

Domingo said Olga wanted to go and was happy when they left. But teachers say a lot of the time children don’t want to leave. Parents lure them with promises of new toys, restaurants and a nice school.

Páez borrowed nearly \$3,000 from relatives who are charging him 5% interest. “And I don’t know how much more he has borrowed from his friend once he arrived,” Domingo said.

A relative also lent her about \$65 to cover household expenses until Paez starts sending money back.

“He didn’t leave me a penny,” she said. Every two weeks, she spends about \$20 on corn and \$14 on beans, plus more on soap, eggs and other needs that pop up.

While families seem to know that bringing a child is the most likely way to get to the U.S., misinformation abounds about why that is. Many erroneously believe it's a special U.S. program under Trump that first allowed unaccompanied minors to stay in the U.S., and that now parents traveling with children can stay. They don't have to hide anymore, they say. They can go directly to the authorities.

Domingo says it saddens her to hear people say her husband will eventually get deported, but that the government will keep her daughter.

"Maybe it's true, but one doesn't know what the government over there is going to say," she said.

In the meantime, she'll have to find a way to sustain the family until he finds a job. And she has Candelaria López, her 15-year-old daughter, at home to help.