
Guest Column: Is the American Dream fading in the West?

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I recently spent two days with a Mexican national named Alfredo because his experience and many of his surprising opinions seemed widely shared: America, he's concluded, isn't worth the struggle.

"The last time I crossed into the U.S., we had to walk for seven days under constant rain," Alfredo told me. "I'm glad I never have to do that again."

We were hiking a trail near his home in central Mexico, where rain had turned the land green, with maturing cornfields flanked by rows of beans and squash.

For years, Alfredo, 37, worked as a landscaper and also as a roofer in the American Southwest. These days, though, he stays home. "My land is full of life. I only left my country like everyone else because I had to. I was poor and back then it was a violent place."

Alfredo lives in the state of Guanajuato, which is among the top migrant-sending states in Mexico. Now, roughly 10.9 million Mexican-born residents live in America, and the majority came from small towns like the one I was walking through.

I thought of my parents, who left Iowa and Arkansas in the 1970s to head West. In their case they were fleeing segregation, but like Alfredo, they were in search of opportunity. In 1974, they moved to Telluride, Colorado, then a busted mining town aspiring to become another Aspen. That first winter they lived in the back of a van while they remodeled an old mining shack, which they purchased for \$20,000. Neither had a college education, but in those days a degree wasn't required to aspire to a middle-class life.

My father worked construction and my mom waited tables. Money was tight, but the first ski lift had just gone in, and the future looked promising. These days, both continue to work, but they are financially stable in large part because of the equity in a house they owned decades ago.

Today, opportunities in the West are harder to come by. My childhood home in Telluride, although no longer in the family, recently appraised for just over \$5 million, representing a 24,900% increase since my parents first purchased it. Wages, in turn, have been stuck in neutral for decades. And while wandering hippies may still show up in vans, few are able to purchase property of their own unless they're packing a trust fund. As the middle-class fades away, what's left seems to narrow down to property owners and workers.

If he'd been born a few decades earlier, Alfredo said, he might have tried to stay in the United States. "But all I did in the U.S. was work from sunup to sundown, and for what? At least here I have my home and my cornfields, I get to see my family every day, and I'm connected to the land."

Alfredo's not alone. Today, more migrants are returning to Mexico than are leaving. The outflow back to Mexico is affecting Western states particularly hard, because most of the Mexicans who do migrate to this country are settling in southern states like Arkansas, North Carolina and Georgia. Similar trends are evident within smaller sending countries like El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras and Guatemala.

According to my research, the migrants returning to Mexico tend to leave states such as Arizona, California, Colorado and Texas. These demographic shifts have contributed to an acute labor shortage.

For generations, Mexican migrants subsidized the expansion of the West by providing cheap workers. Men like Alfredo worked alongside newcomers like my parents, and together, they helped build now-legendary towns like Telluride. Now, just as Mexican migration rates reverse, the cost of construction, housing, and basic services in the West are all on the rise.

As we settled into the trail toward Alfredo's hometown of San Martin de Terreros, I asked Alfredo if he planned to come back to the U.S. one day. "No, señor," he responded without hesitation. "I have everything I need right here."

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