
Willing workers are right at the border

August 6, 2021



For more than a year, our country longed for the economy to restart. But now that businesses are once again open, employers find themselves wondering where all the workers have gone.

In my town of Durango, Colorado, labor shortages have deeply affected the entire community. One business owner is Juvenal Corona, originally from Mexico, who co-owns Nayarit, one of Durango's most popular Mexican restaurants. Since COVID restrictions lifted in the spring, he's been short-staffed and says he's never worked harder in his 20 years in the restaurant business.

The main reason he cites: The red-hot real estate market, along with historically high rents that have made it difficult to recruit employees.

"In my 10 years with Nayarit, we've never closed due to a lack of workers," Corona explained. "But recently we were forced to close each of our locations one day a week." He and his staff are doing their best; all he asks is that customers "show a little more compassion when it comes to waiting for their orders."

Like many restaurants, Nayarit depends on a combination of native-born workers and immigrants to function. In recent months, though, neither group has been showing up.

Besides lack of housing, another factor is low wages in the hospitality sector. Still, Michael French, who heads La Plata County's Economic Development Alliance, isn't convinced the shortage is limited to the service industry: "What's going on is pervasive across all industries and wage categories," he says. "I believe we're just now beginning to comprehend the challenges that labor shortages present. I think we're in a workforce transition."

Part of that transition — in Durango and elsewhere in the country — involves our nation's shifting demographics.

The United States is aging. At the beginning of the 20th century, the nation's typical resident was 23. The average citizen today is 38. And for white Americans, who make up 86% of Durango's population, the median age is now 58

In addition, fertility rates are in free fall. At 1.6 children per woman, birthrates are now at their lowest levels since 1979. Thanks to the pandemic, birthrates have dropped even further.

Not so long ago, steady flows of young migrants helped the U.S. economy compensate for aging workers and low birth rates. But immigration to this country peaked long ago in 1910, when nearly 15% of the population was foreign-born.

It wasn't until after World War II that government-sponsored initiatives like the *Bracero* program started a new wave of immigration. By 2010, immigrants once again made up just over 14% of the country's population.

However, today, instead of putting migrants to work, the U.S. government works to keep them out. We've stepped up enforcement at the border and under the last administration, launched deportation campaigns against undocumented immigrants.

Moreover, in 2020, the number of immigrant and non-immigrant visas issued was down 54% from the previous year. In turn, temporary and permanent worker visas fell by 44%. And as surprising as it might sound, more Mexicans are going home today than are coming to the United States.

I believe the solution to our labor crisis is literally knocking on our southern door. In 2019, at the height of the migrant caravans from Central America, I made several trips across the border to Tijuana to interview migrants. Many of the individuals I talked to were staying at Casa del Migrante, which has been housing migrants for more than three decades.

I met hundreds of willing workers hoping to achieve the American dream of working hard and getting ahead. One man, Carlos, summed up the chaos that so many were fleeing. Originally from Honduras, Carlos was accompanied by his 3-year-old son.

“The gangs killed my brother and sister. And they threatened my son and tortured me,” Carlos said, revealing multiple scars across his chest. “I hope to get asylum and find enough work to buy a little house for my son,” Carlos said. “What more could one want?”

As our nation continues to age, the need for workers like Carlos, who has varied job experience, and others like him, becomes more and more evident. Through a guest-worker program, migrants like Carlos could help fix our country’s demand for additional workers. They would also boost Social Security’s assets and renew America’s commitment to providing refugees a safe haven. The workers are close, waiting to prove themselves.

The question is whether or not we’re willing to open the door.

Ben Waddell is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. He is an associate professor of sociology at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado.