

Haitians in Tapachula: For many, a daily struggle to survive | Part 3

Leonardo March

“Haitians in Tapachula” is a series that takes an in-depth look at Haitians in Tapachula, a city in southern Mexico about 20 miles north of the Guatemala-Mexico border. Many Haitians who make it here had spent years in Brazil and Chile before continuing toward North America in the ongoing search for better lives. In Tapachula, which serves as a migration waystation, many contemplate how to proceed.

This is the third installment in the series. Read the [first](#) and [second](#) installments.

Tapachula, Mexico — Ebens Charles and Jocelin Laborde, a married couple, never expected things to be so hard in Tapachula after migrating from Chile.



Ebens Charles and Jocelin Laborde have been in Tapachula for seven months, unable to find stable work. They depend on friends and the occasional job to survive after spending \$5,000 for the journey from Chile and their savings dried up.

“I’m in Tapachula, but haven’t made it to Mexico yet,” said Charles. “We are suffering here. Just imagine, seven, now eight months without work, and I don’t have anyone to help us.”

The couple, who have been together for two years, spent \$5,000 on their trip from Chile. Their savings have dried up, and they find work occasionally. Recently, they obtained the “Visitor ID for Humanitarian Reason” that permits asylum seekers to work for one year and relocate to other cities in Mexico.

“I was not expecting so much hardship here,” says Charles. “We are suffering here.”

“You eat something today, then you start wondering what you’ll eat tomorrow,” interjects Laborde. “Sometimes you eat a plantain in the morning, and that’s it, until the next day.”

The pair’s mirrors the experiences of many Haitian asylum seekers seeking employment. Despite being able to legally join the labor market, many barriers keep them from finding work and they often resort to creating their own opportunities.

A 2019 [International Organization Migration survey](#) of 2,413 asylum seekers in Tapachula found that 41% of asylum seekers were unemployed. Within the unemployed group, 40% were Haitian. By comparison, the unemployment rate for the state of Chiapas, where Tapachula is located, is [2.9%](#).

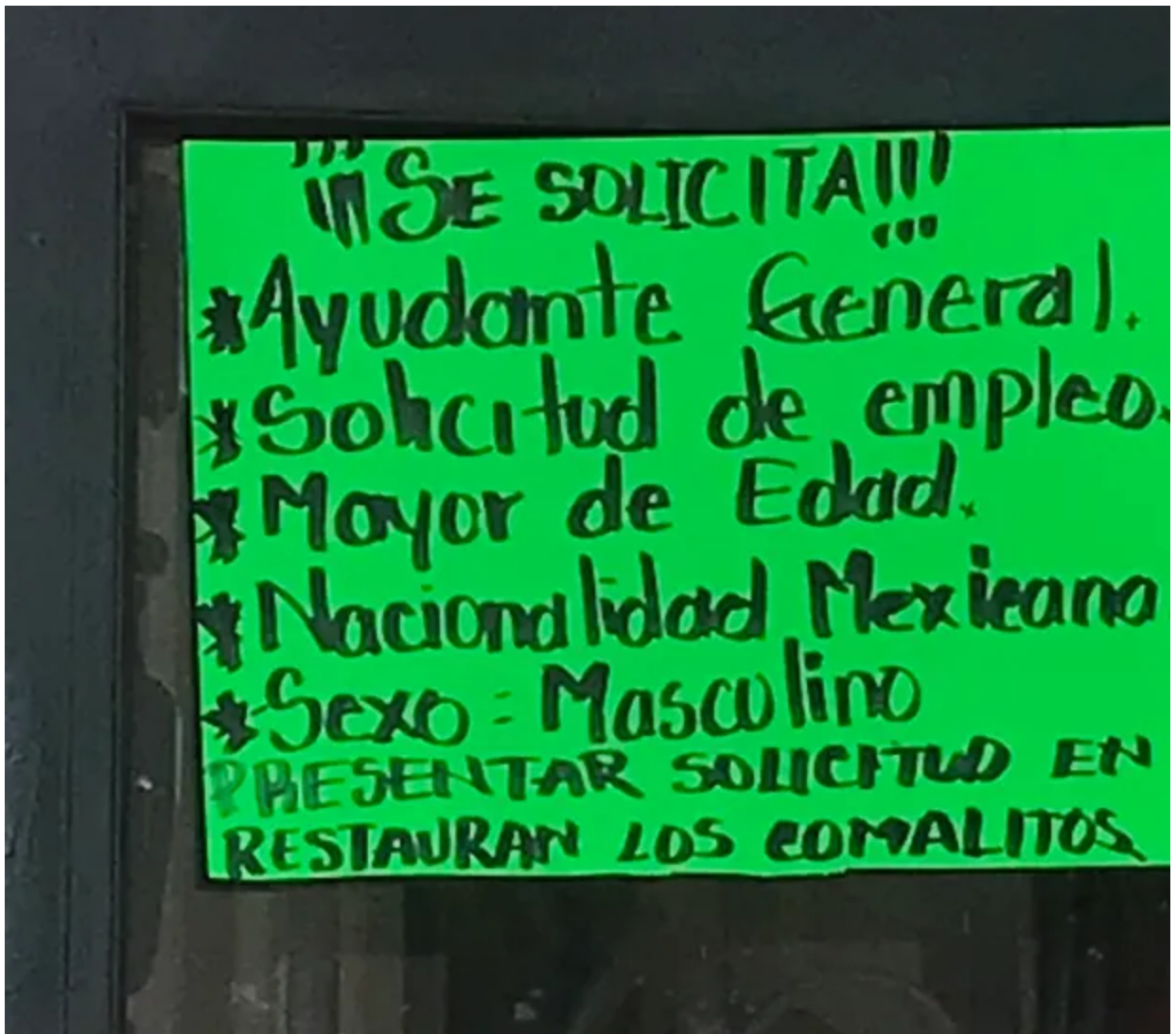
But finding a job is only half of the problem. Many Haitians interviewed said incomes that barely allow them to survive in the city, whether as a hired hand or street vendor. Daily earnings for many Haitians fall between \$8 to \$16 dollars per day. Basic rents in Tapachula are in the range of \$100 to \$130 per month, plus utilities expenses.

Pierre — who declined to give any details about him for fear of jeopardizing his immigration status — said that often when he goes shopping he finds there’s the “normal price for Mexicans but when I go shopping, prices are doubled, for everything.”

Pierre explains that it seems many believe Haitians have lots of savings, but “if I had a lot of money, why would I come here,” he said, exasperated.

The barriers Haitians face go beyond high unemployment, low wages and price gouging.

“I went to inquire about a job, as there was a sign requesting workers,” said Charles. “When I went to ask they told me, it was only for Mexicans”



A sign at a Tapachula restaurant seeking workers with Mexican nationality only. While such signs are not commonly seen in the city, many Haitians said they have been denied jobs for not being Mexican.

Mexican [law](#) allows asylum seekers to work legally while their requests are being processed.

“What I had, it’s gone. That’s why I want to leave, to the capital, to work,” said 28-year-old Peterson Mercy, who had been in Tapachula for seven months as of April. “Without work to pay for rent, for food it’s hard. And things are hard here because there’s almost no work.”

Most Haitians want to leave Tapachula and continue north, to the United States or another Mexican City. While navigating the long wait of immigration, many depend on friends and relatives, according to the [International Organization Migration survey](#). That reality in turn places asylum seekers in a difficult position to help the families they left behind in Haiti.

“They are all on the lookout,” said Jean. “waiting for us to be in a better position to help them.”

In the case of Charles and Jocelin, they are expected to help their relatives in Haiti,

even while needing help themselves in Tapachula. Charles and Jocelin each have children from a previous relationship.

“Before yesterday, a friend of mine sent me \$50, and from that I sent my son some money,” said Charles. “I kept \$11. With those \$11, let’s see what we eat these days.”

Street selling, local organizations help some make it

Others are not able to borrow money, and the low earnings make it impossible to send money to relatives.

“As a responsible parent, my duty is to send him money,” said Julio, a married man with a child in Haiti who’s been in Tapachula for nine months. “What I make is not enough to send them money.”

With the situation being so dire and with few formal work opportunities, many Haitians like Julio have turned to Tapachula’s [informal economy](#), working as street vendors to earn a living. Most interviewed said they earn between \$8 and \$16 per day, offering everything from water to printing services, where clients can print and laminate immigration documents, to hair braiding.

Julio sells smartphone chips, earning between \$11 and \$16 per day.

Valentina Joseph, a 26-year-old vendor, braids hair to survive, drawing both Haitian and Mexican clients to her chair on the sidewalk. While vendors create their own job opportunities they are not exempt from economic issues.

“If people don’t come to get braids,” said Joseph “there’s no money to pay for rent.”
[To survive in Tapachula, many Haitians turn to street vending–Photos](#)