

Haitians in Tapachula: At decision time, many choose Mexico over US permanently | Part 4

Leonardo March



Asylum seekers at Benito Juárez park in Tapachula, Mexico. Photo by Leonardo March.

TAPACHULA, Mexico — Eight months after arriving in town, Melvil Richemond is finally allowing himself to dream. The 34-year-old is thinking about opening a Haitian restaurant in Mexico and bringing his wife and child from Haiti to live with him in Mexico.

“I want to stay in Mexico to build my life,” said Richemond, while waiting in line at the National Migration Institute office to secure a Permanent Resident card. “The most important thing is my family.”

Previously, Richemond lived in Chile for five years and left because he couldn’t bring his family there. Going on to the U.S., he said, could mean living “15 or 20 years without papers” and a long time before he might leave it to get his family.

But in Mexico, Richemond has already secured a humanitarian visa, which offers him a one-year permit to live and work in Mexico. The Permanent Resident card he now seeks would allow him to legally bring his wife and 7-year-old, whom he hasn't seen in six years.

"Mexico is better," Richemond said. "There's work in Mexico."



Mervil Richemond, 34, who wants to open a Haitian restaurant in Tijuana or Mexicali is one among many Haitians who have chosen Mexico over the United States as their destination. April 4, 2022. Photo by Leonardo March

Promise of jobs in other parts a draw

More Haitians leaving Tapachula, once their papers are in order, stay in Mexico because the country's northern states offer stable employment. Plus, they fear being deported by the United States if they keep going north.

There is no estimate on the number of Haitians living in Mexico.

Dr. Rodrigo Domínguez-Villegas, Director of Research at the [Latino Politics and Policy Initiative](#), an Los Angeles, Calif. organization addressing policy challenges among Latinos in the US, said asylum seekers are choosing Mexico primarily for its economy.

"Mexico's economy has been relatively stable," said Domínguez-Villegas. "It hasn't grown very

much in the past few years. It also hasn't had any major shocks besides COVID and so people have found niches where they can work and they can somewhat integrate."

Many Haitians said Mexicali and Tijuana, in Baja California, could be good potential destinations because more jobs are available. Monterey, 140 miles from the US border, is also seen as an attractive destination.

In Tijuana, according to [news reports](#), Haitians seem to be integrating in the local labor market by filling job vacancies in the textiles, fisheries and restaurant industries.

In Baja California, the unemployment rate is 1.5%, the third lowest in all of Mexico, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, the agency in charge of institutional data.

A more "open" Mexico versus US deportations

In addition, Domínguez-Villegas has said, Mexico is becoming a destination country. In a 2019 report, [*Protection and Reintegration: Mexico Reforms Migration Agenda in an Increasingly Complex Era*](#), he said there is "a new openness by Mexico to offer temporary visas to the migrants."

Thus, the issuance of 41,409 humanitarian visas to Haitian asylum seekers living throughout Mexico in 2021, allowing them to stay and work in Mexico.

"I want to go to the USA, but they deport a lot of Haitians, Venezuelans, Cubans," said Jean Remy Cetoute. "I don't know why. It's mostly Haitians."

Deportation is a big factor in the decision-making. Many Haitians worry about the possibility if they try to reach the US, preferring to play it safe by staying in Mexico.

Angelot Petion, a plumber and painter by trade, said, "If I go to the United States now, I'll get deported."

The 34-year-old, who sells oranges for a living in Tapachula, said he wants to leave, but prefers to wait for the immigration papers before making a final decision.

The Biden administration has deported more than [20,000 Haitians](#), almost as many as the number of Haitians deported in the last 20 years combined in the United States, according to the [Quixote Center](#), a social justice organization based in Maryland.

Some of the deportations were carried out under [Title 42](#), a provision of US health law the Trump administration invoked in 2020 due to COVID-19 and that Biden has continued implementing until May 23, 2022.

Although monthly border apprehensions at the US Southwest Border for all nationalities continue to rise, Haitian apprehensions have fluctuated from 17,638 in September 2021 to [2,120](#) in March 2022.