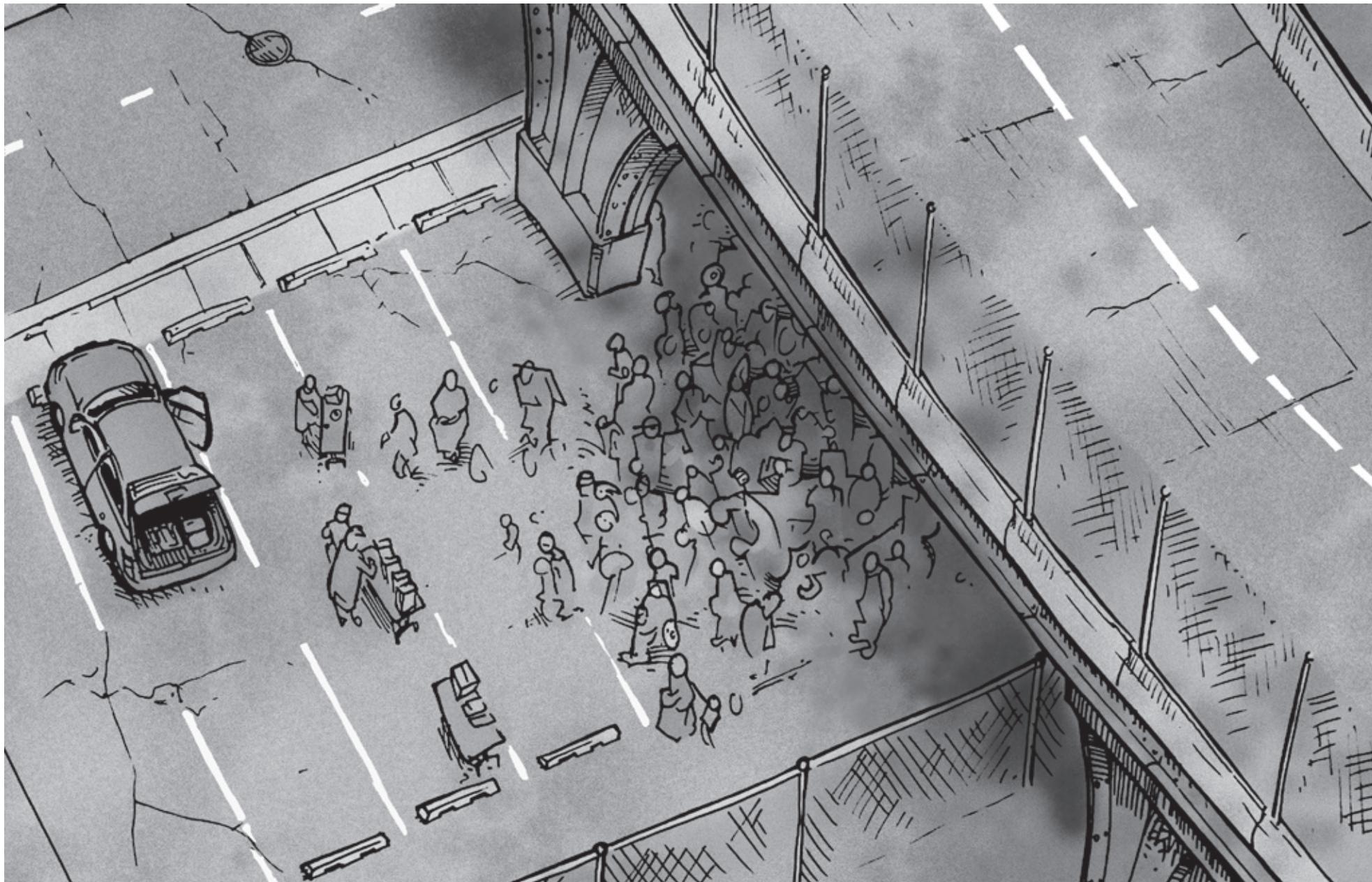


## FEATURESTORY



# Pichóneros

## The Country's Economic Chill Leaves Day Laborers in the Cold

by William Hillyard  
illustration by Kenn Penn  
photographs by Preston Drake-Hillyard

**P**ATTI CHURCH EASED HER CAR AROUND THE CORNER and into the swirling crowd, stopping near the piles of clothing spilling from ripped plastic trash bags. Flimsy folding tables stood waiting for her. As Patti opened her car door, she became the center of the crowd; volunteers looked to her for direction, asking questions—where do you want this, who is to do that? One man, his face bristling with a silver stubble, opened Patti's trunk and began unloading paper grocery bags to the folding tables, others grabbed cases of soda, boxes of cakes, plastic trays of salads, until the wobbly tables were top-heavy with food. Another, Francisco, grabbed a box from the car's back seat, then stood shuffling from foot to foot, looking for an opening to the tables. As Patti approached, about fifty men, their weathered hands warmed in worn pockets, congealed into a tight group.

Rafael paced around the rear of the crowd, his sun-browned face taut with worry. He could see Patti, there behind the tables, her arms pointing, gesturing, her blond bob framing her soft face. The hiss of the nearby highway overpass drowned her words. Rafael hadn't made it back to his camp the night before, and when he returned in the morning he found that it had burned; southern California

winter had arrived after a long, warm autumn, bringing an icy rain and night-time temperatures near freezing. The others, retreating from the cold and the rain, had built their fire too close to the shelter. It caught fire and burned everything. Rafael returned to find that he possessed, literally, only the clothes on his back. He needed Patti's help. A man, his arms stretched around a polyester comforter, wiggled in behind Rafael and over his shoulder shouted, "Who's the one who lost his camp last night?" Rafael looked around with a start. "Who's the one who lost his camp?" Other men gestured at Rafael. "You the one?" Rafael nodded as the man pushed the bundle into his arms, his fingers barely clasping around it. Patti had come through again.

"These men live simply," Patti says of them, "They send most of what they earn home to their families in Mexico." In the past, she fed about 50 men here each night, but the number has swollen recently to 60 or more. The men she and her group feed here on this corner spend their days along busy, nearby Doheny Park Road standing facing traffic, waiting for work. This street has been a day labor site for two decades and has seen anti-immigration protests in recent years by groups like the Minutemen. In fact, a group of Minutemen held a "flag rally" here in January, their first

# Tougher border enforcement is actually enlarging the settled population of undocumented immigrants in the United States

demonstration of 2009. “Nothing has taken place,” said one Minuteman, videotaping his group’s protest. “Our purpose, so far, has been successful; there have been zero hires. No body is picking up the illegal aliens,” he continued into his camera. They came to disrupt the hiring of day laborers, but the economy had already done their job for them.

It is not that day laborers like Rafael choose to live outdoors; it’s just that, as the U.S. economy slows, the work doesn’t come. The current day labor trend has grown up around the boom in construction and the collapse in the industry has affected day laborers disproportionately. California alone has lost more than 200,000 construction jobs since the peak two years ago according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Construction work in Southern California, like elsewhere in the country, has all but disappeared.

The slow economy only makes a bad situation worse. The UCLA-based Center for the Study of Urban Poverty (CSUP) estimated that in 2006, before the effects of the current economic crisis were fully felt, only about 10 percent of day laborers would find work on a given day, forcing them to live and feed a family on an average of about \$700 a month. With the construction downturn, employers just aren’t coming as they had in years past. No numbers are available for the informal hiring sites, but the organization-run hiring centers in the area report a downturn in the number of employers coming for workers. Interfaith Community Services, which operates a day labor hiring center in nearby North County, San Diego, shows a 67% percent drop in worker hires at their center. Stacey Burke, spokesperson for True Blue, Inc., which owns the temporary labor service Labor Ready, says that her company has seen a significant decline in demand for their services over the last 18 months. On the average day on the corner in Dana Point only one or two guys get work.

Up until a few months ago, Francisco considered himself lucky. He shared an apartment with eight other people and had his own room. Recently, however, he has been unable to raise the \$400 a month rent and has had to move to the living room sofa—they charge him only \$180 for that.

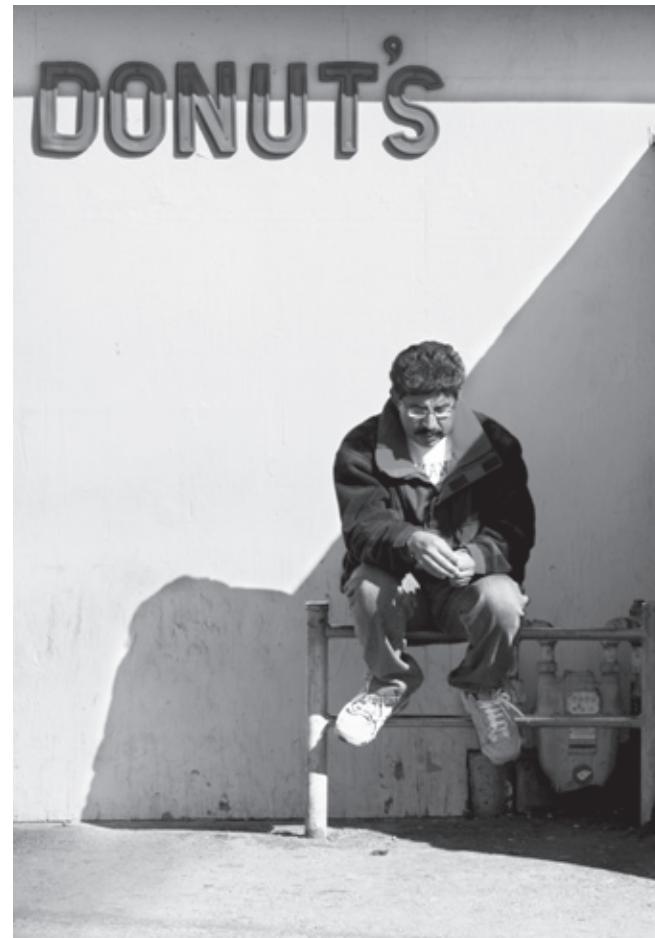
These days, Francisco eats one sure meal a day, the one Patti and the others give him, but he also watches the Smart & Final across the street. Sometimes, when the bread is delivered, they get too much and leave some outside for people to take, day old, but it’s OK. Other days, he finds bruised, discarded apples or other fruit left behind the store. Some of them are still good. That holds him over until 4:30 when Patti and her group come with the food.

“IT’S UNUSUAL TO HAVE THIS MANY MEN HERE THIS TIME OF YEAR,” Patti says, “usually many go home to Mexico for the holidays. It’s just getting too hard for them to return to the U.S., to get back across the border.” In spite of the scarcity of work, migrants remain because they feel they will fare better here than in their home countries. Yet, they cannot return even temporarily for fear that they will not be able to return. Indeed study after study shows that an unforeseen consequence of the increased militarization of the border and the construction of the border fence is that migrants coming to the United States to work are virtually locked in, bottled-up in the U.S., unwilling to return to Mexico for fear that they will be unable to reenter the U.S. again. In fact, recent research penned by the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (CCIS) concluded that since the start of the current border security build-up beginning in the mid-1990s, tougher border enforcement is actually enlarging the settled population of undocumented immigrants in the United States. At the same time, however, the cost of evading the enhanced border enforcement is rising.

Coyotes, the human traffickers who act as agents and guides bringing people across the border, have become a necessity for these undocumented migrants. The extension of the border fence and the increased patrolling and monitoring have caused an explosion in the human trafficking business along the border with the cost migrants pay to cross now topping \$2000 per person. The CCIS report finds a “nearly perfect inverse relationship between coyote fees and the probability of return migration” back to Mexico. The migrants can’t leave because they can’t afford to come back.

The coyotes’ increased prices reflect the new difficulties migrants face crossing into the U.S.; they continually adapt to the changing security conditions and increased enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, coyotes now smuggle migrants through more remote areas where the chance of apprehension by border officials is less. To avoid enhanced security, migrants can expect to walk for several days through desert or mountain areas to get into the country. Many die—more than 500 bodies were recovered along this border in 2005—mostly due to exposure to the elements. And those are just the ones that were found. Certainly others, overcome by heat and thirst, have perished only to have their flesh devoured and their bones scattered by the scavenging animals of the deep desert.

Two years ago, Francisco returned to his village near Puerto Escondido, Mexico to tend to his ailing mother. After



his mother’s death, he started back to San Juan Capistrano, California. Hiring a coyote in Tijuana, he waited for several hours until they signaled that it was clear, then he and five others jumped the border fence within a hundred yards of immigration control at the San Ysidro border crossing—the busiest border crossing in the world. Once on the U.S. side, the coyotes ushered him into a waiting car and drove him the 80 miles to his home. It cost him \$1,500. “It was like a really expensive taxi ride,” he remembers.

For those who can afford the higher costs, enterprising coyotes will traffic migrants into the U.S. right under Border Patrol noses, going over, under, or through the brand-new border fence and avoiding the perilous slog through the desert. The expanded-metal fence Francisco crossed was designed with a mesh too tight to climb; yet he and the coyotes climbed it. The U.S. government has since topped the fence with three spiraling courses of razor-sharp concertina wire. Now, maintenance crews work 365 days a year repairing the man-sized holes cut almost nightly in the fence with cheap, rechargeable saws. At those favorite spots to cross, the ground-level portions of the barrier are more patch than fence.

Border Patrol trucks cruising the no man’s land between the new high-tech fence and the rusty, original fence bounce and rattle over potholes and patches, areas of concrete fill pumped into voids. Occasionally, as happened recently, a rumbling vehicle will break through, collapsing a tunnel dug across the border. They call this stretch of road Memo Lane, because of the memo the first agent had to write explaining what happened to his vehicle. Nine tunnels were discovered in this area between 2005 and 2007; twenty-one were uncovered in the entire San Diego sector during the same period. The Memo Lane tunnels emerge in a border-area parking lot where migrants and other contraband are loaded into waiting vehicles just feet from the official port of entry



in San Ysidro.

In addition, more and more coyotes evade security by smuggling their clients into the country right through the legal ports of entry. Studies show that as many as 30 percent of all illegal immigrants entering the country in 2007 came in through the normal border crossings. About half enter hidden in a vehicle, but a significant number cross like anyone else would; using forged or borrowed documents, they simply drive across.

Even today, with the heightened border security and high-tech detection equipment, the odds of a coyote getting his pollos into the U.S. are nearly 100 percent according to the CCIS study. Migrants apprehended crossing the border illegally are returned to Mexico the very same day, where most make another attempt to cross immediately. On-going studies by the Center of Immigration Policy show that while as many as 44 percent of illegal entrants were apprehended trying to enter the U.S. on their first try, 97 percent made it into the country by the third attempt. These studies suggest that an immigrant is no more likely to be apprehended today than he was before the border security build-up beginning in the mid-90s.

The number of undocumented immigrants apprehended at the border has declined in recent years, but experts disagree as to how much the increased security accounts for the decline. While the Department of Homeland Security believes that the militarization of the border accounts for the decrease in apprehensions, formal studies such as the CCIS study provide a far more complex explanation including the worsening economy and the fact that coyotes are increasingly better at avoiding apprehension.

Most migrants know of the cost and danger and choose to come anyway because, until recently, they were assured of finding work. Wages for low-skilled labor here in the U.S. are ten times those of Mexico—labor economist Philip Martin, Chair of the UC Davis Comparative Immigration & Integration Program, believes that lowering the wage disparity

between the U.S. and Mexico to four or five to one could reverse this migration trend. And, while unemployment in Mexico appears to be low, currently about 4 percent, the low wages create a crisis in underemployment. The indications are strong, however, that this year, for the first time fewer immigrants are coming and the worsening economy is the main contributing factor in this decline.

**F**RANCISCO AND RAFAEL, LIKE THE OTHER MIGRANT DAY laborers that Patti feeds, work as pichoneros, as the day laborers here in Dana Point call themselves. Like their namesake, the pigeon, pichoneros earn their living by scratching up crumbs from the dirt. While day laborers have become an increasingly visible part of the American urban landscape in recent years, the phenomenon is not new. In the U.S., reports of laborers seeking new work each day date back to at least 1780. The practice became so commonplace that, in 1834, New York City set aside places on city streets and along the waterfront where casual laborers could meet employers. In those days, half of New York's male Irish immigrant population and a good percentage of Irish women worked as day laborers.

In California, agricultural work was the principal form of day labor, but as the cities grew the demand for casual workers in the city centers grew as well. In the early 20th century, for example, a concentration of cheap flophouses and Mexican-owned businesses attracted Mexican migrants to Sonoratown, as Los Angeles' historic old town was known. Gathering skilled and unskilled urban workers attracted “man catchers”—labor representatives—to Sonoratown interested in hiring casual labor. The scene was repeated all over the West.

Today, according to the 2006 CSUP study, more than 115,000 workers across America gather in the hundreds of informal day labor hiring sites. The study estimates that three-quarters of this huge workforce is undocumented. While the day labor trend is largest in the West, it is following

migrants North and East. Because of the increased hardship, many frustrated migrants talk about going home to their country of origin. A Pew Hispanic Center report released last October concludes that the size of the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. “appears to have declined since 2007.” Due to a large margin of error in the study, these findings are inconclusive, but the evidence is strong that at least as many migrants are leaving as are coming. That immigrants are leaving the country is not without historical precedent, however. In the early 20th century some two million Italian immigrants came to the United States—two-thirds of them men who came to find work. When the hard times of the depression struck in the 1930s, half a million Italians returned home.

It's not that the thought of going back to Mexico hasn't crossed Francisco's mind. But he knows that, no matter what, he will stick it out here. Always the optimist, he holds on to his dreams of opening his own restaurant and using the money he earns to help his village in Mexico. To Rafael, however, after the cold, wet days sleeping under a bridge and the low prospects of finding work, the appeal of returning to Michoacán is stronger. But he's been here thirty years—he has kids, his whole family is here. He knows there is nothing in Mexico to go home to.

**E**ACH NIGHT AFTER PATTI AND THE OTHERS SPREAD THE donated food on the rickety folding tables, nobody eats; no one touches anything. The men crowd close to the tables in anticipation and a hush falls over the crowd. They wait for Patti. Patti has been feeding the homeless and poor here for the past ten years, originally as part of a Catholic mission but later as part of Welcome INN (Interfaith Need Network), a consortium of area church members that Patti helped to found. She gets the food where she can; most is purchased with contributions from members of the area churches or donated, day-old, from supermarkets and catering companies. Heads bowed, Patti gestures to one of the men who begins a prayer in Spanish. The others join in. After the Lord's Prayer is repeated in English, the men dig in. In minutes the tables are bare, in half an hour the street is vacant, empty; no trace has been left. Down the street, a small clutch of men talk and smoke cigarettes and wait for darkness to slip beneath the freeway overpass and under the blankets they call home. •

**Left :** Francisco Rico waits for work along Doheny Park Road.  
**Right:** Jesus Gonzales can't remember the last time he worked.