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María Cristina Hall*

A “Controversial” Proposal For Canada’s Housing Crisis

Canada, like the United States, faces a housing crisis, with 5.8 million new homes needed by 2030, according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.¹ The reasons for this are manifold. One of them is that investors are buying up housing, tripling housing costs from 2005 to 2024 while wages remain relatively stagnant, as journalist Andre Mayer has reported for CBC News.² But another reason is that the construction industry faces a major labor shortage as the population ages and gets ready for retirement. Canada needs an estimated 500,000 additional construction workers to fulfill housing needs over the next six years according to an RBC report.³ Yet, the country has projected an immigration target of a mere 500,000 permanent residents for 2025,⁴

who would presumably work across various sectors and not solely in construction. Furthermore, about 60 percent of Canada’s permanent migration comes through the Express Entry Program, which privileges those migrants considered “skilled”. Although the Canadian federal government announced a Housing Action Plan in late 2023 to prioritize applications from people with specific home-building skills, including construction, the Express Entry Program (EEP) requires that applicants have a job offer already.⁵ This is somewhat contradictory, as apprenticeships in Canada usually last two to five years, with qualifications exams taken throughout before workers can apply for the Red Seal to certify their skills across Canada.⁶ The EEP also places emphasis on language and educational background, both of which are less relevant for the housing sector.

Canada’s construction industry faces the daunting task of recruiting enough construction workers as its own

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workers age and retire, all while populations boom in areas like British Columbia. Given that the United States faces labor shortages in housing construction as well, it has been reported that Canada's Prince Edward Island is now trying to recruit workers from Ireland and the United Kingdom.⁷ Yet this does not make economic sense, considering that Ireland and the UK are perfectly suitable places for construction workers to remain—not migrate. Something has got to give.

Canada is part of the Canada-US-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA in Canada or USMCA in the United States), so why not look to Mexico? "Unskilled" Mexican laborers have participated in temporary work programs in Canada since the mid-1970s. The most well-known of these is the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). In 2019, according to Masferrer and Van Haren, Mexicans accounted for 10 percent of all temporary workers in the country.⁸ Meanwhile, the CIMM (Canadian Citizenship and Immigration) has reported that Canada recruited 29,000 construction workers in 2023 (compared to just 42,000 permanent residents who intended to work in construction for the entire 2016 to 2023 period).⁹ But, let's face it, Canada's housing needs are not temporary, and if an apprenticeship in Canada can take five years before one can even consider taking the Red Seal exam, which provides a vote of confidence for workers seeking contracts across the country, Canada, then, should shift away from its promotion of temporary "unskilled" migration and open paths for long-term resettlement. If Mexican construction workers were offered to settle in Canada with their families, where they would take on a few years of apprenticeship, with the prospect of steady jobs in the future, many would certainly heed the call. Perhaps if Canadian provinces or the federal government were to cooperate with Mexican consulates as well as with Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs directly, more could be done to address Canada's housing crisis through Mexican labor. Construction is Canada's top contributor to the country's GDP,¹⁰ but only about 2 percent of immigrants work in construction, as Benjamin Tal has written for CIBC Economics.¹¹

Now, another proposal to consider, which is perhaps more controversial but essentially smart, is to recruit people who have been deported from the United States to Mexico. There are about 3.6 million deported people in Mexico, and while deportation is heavily stigmatized, the fact is that most deportations are not grounded in

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criminal acts and the percentage of such deportations is ever decreasing. According to TRAC Immigration's "Criminal Grounds for Deportation" charts, only 3,481 people were deported on criminal grounds in 2023.¹² A simple screening would thus suffice. Furthermore, an inordinate number of deportees have experience in construction. About 20 percent of the Mexican population in the United States works in construction, according to the 2022 Yearbook on Migration and Remittances in Mexico.¹³ This implies that many returnees and deportees are familiarized with the construction styles of our neighbors to the north (perhaps this is not evident, but construction between Mexico and the rest of North America varies widely, since Mexican constructions favors cooler concrete-based buildings while housing in the United States and Canada relies on wood, might have basements, tends to use sheetrock and drywall, etc.). Second, many deportees are familiar with the language and culture of, at least, Anglo-North America.

This is, undoubtedly, a win-win situation that could remediate the effects of a cruel deportation regime by which the undocumented people that the US economy relies on have been terrorized to keep their labor cheap. This labor is nonetheless extremely valuable, and it is worth noting that people who have migrated at some point in their lives, especially undocumented, have usually done so because they face undignified conditions in their home countries—violence, lack of safety, and subpar economic opportunities. Such vulnerabilities can worsen upon deportation given a number of factors: the stigma that surrounds deportation; the fact that deportees are cut off from their communities in the United States while often lacking networks in Mexico; problems with the transferability of education and job opportunities (due to paperwork, language barriers, and wage differences); and housing issues stemming from insufficient funds, documentation (there are many challenges with obtaining an official government ID, for example), and networks (the

kind needed to secure a guarantor in order to rent, or even the availability of homes owned by family or friends). Many deportees also have family to support back in the United States, a nearly impossible feat on a Mexican construction salary. This suggests that many would be willing to migrate again. If this can be done to the benefit of Mexicans and Canadians, then why not? For those worried about this being a losing situation for Mexico, let us merely consider how important remittances are to the Mexican economy, reaching the order of 63.3 billion US dollars in 2023.

With this proposal, I have not only sought to cast light on a housing crisis that has led to homelessness and ruin for our two neighbors to the north, but also to challenge our assumptions about migration and deportation. Recruiting and hiring US-to-Mexico deportees would show how unconscionable the practice of deportation really is. At the end of the day, we are humans in an integrated and at times unfair economy. Why not make it better? Why not honor the skills and work experience of Mexicans who have sacrificed so much just to work in the United States? For Mexican migrants, Canada could be the new land of opportunity. ■■

Notes

- 1 Ali, Adena. "Canada needs 5.8 million new homes by 2030 to tackle affordability crisis, CMHC warns". June 23, 2022. CBC News.
- 2 Mayer, Andre. "The dirty secret of the housing crisis? Homeowners like high prices". April 15, 2024. CBC News.
- 3 Hudes, Sammy. "Solving shortage of construction workers key to housing growth: experts". April 18, 2024. The Canadian Press.
- 4 Nixon, Geoff. "Canda's plan for more immigrants aims to boost workforce, but experts say they'll need support" November 6, 2022. CBC News.
- 5 Daisy Xiong references Neil Moody, CEO of CHBA BC, in her 2024 article "Immigration policy changes needed to meet construction demand" for *Western Investor*.
- 6 "How to get a Red Seal Certification in Ontario". September 20, 2023. *Contractors Insurance*.
- 7 "How the P.E.I. Construction Association plans to recruit international workers". 2024. CBC News.
- 8 Masferrer, Claudia and Ian Van Haren. "Mexican Migration to Canada: Temporary Worker Programs, Visa Imposition, and NAFTA Shape Flows." March 20, 2019. *Migration Policy*.
- 9 "CMM - Construction Workers" December 05, 2023. Government of Canada.
- 10 See Andre Mayer (2024).
- 11 Tal, Benjamin. "If they come you will build it — Canada's construction labour shortage". June 20, 2023. *CIBC Capital Market*.
- 12 <https://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/685/>.
- 13 By BBVA Foundation Mexico and the Mexican Secretariat of the Interior, see page 137. Also, according to the 2018 Yearbook, 14.3 percent of returnees worked in construction upon returning to Mexico (see page 80).



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