

NEWS

The Outsiders

By [David Alire Garcia](#)

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For Santa Fe's homeless immigrants, life is a constant search for shelter.

El Capitan's spot is barely a stone's throw from Burger King. He says it's not bad in the summer. In the winter, it must be the ultimate bitch. But you won't hear 29-year-old Alejandro Moreno Cortez, aka El Capitan, complain about his current home: under the bridge on West Alameda Street, just before St. Francis Drive.

His floor and walls are hard concrete, the casing of a large storm drainage channel, with a square opening at each end.

"That's where I stay by myself," he says. "I have my mattresses, one to put underneath me, another on top, and I have my blankets there. That's where I just came from. I'm there every day."

Beside his pile of thin mattresses and blankets, a pair of work boots is neatly lined up against the wall. Next to them, what appear to be hundreds of cigarette butts litter the floor. Facing the arroyo that is the dried-up Santa Fe River, El Capitan's spot looks out, ironically, to the construction of new housing.

"Where there isn't any work, like now during the winter, you have to live on the streets. Some go to the Salvation Army or the other shelter over there," he says, pointing to St. Elizabeth Shelter on Alarid Street. "But sometimes they won't let you in and your only option is the street."

El Capitan, a Durango, Mexico, native, says there are approximately 50 men just like him on any given night, even the coldest nights. Others put the estimate as high as 100 men.

While the plight of Santa Fe's homeless during this cold winter - with low temperatures routinely in the single digits - has been well-publicized, what is less recognized is how many of the city's homeless are also immigrant men.



Cover photo by Ursula Coyote. Cover design by Angela Moore.



A descanso underneath the bridge at Guadalupe and West Alameda streets marks the spot where Jose Pedre Gonzalez was found dead after a heroin overdose nearly three years ago. Known affectionately by his fellow homeless immigrants as "Cuba," the Cuban-born Gonzalez lived on the streets of Santa Fe and under its bridges for nearly 20 years. Photo credit: David Alire Garcia

These men form a marginalized group within a marginalized group. And life when you're both homeless and immigrant can be a double-barreled burden. Besides living on erratic seasonal construction work, nearly all of Santa Fe's homeless immigrants are undocumented. That means even fewer work opportunities and less access to housing.

Jose Luis Villa, a bearded 39-year-old from Delicias, Chihuahua, doesn't sugarcoat his hard-knock life.

As he waits outside the Salvation Army emergency shelter just before check-in time on a recent Monday night, he sums it up:

"Living on the streets is very ugly. You don't have your own place, you don't have your own bed, you don't have a bathroom, you don't always know where you'll get some food," he says. "I don't recommend it to anybody because you suffer."

Oscar Rodriguez, a 34-year-old native of Vera Cruz, Mexico, used to be a prep cook at the plush Inn of the Anasazi in downtown Santa Fe. He arrived here in the spring of 2000, hooking up with his younger brother who had been here since 1993.

"I came directly to his house and when I arrived he had everything ready," Rodriguez whispers, sitting on a wooden bench inside the Santa Fe Public Library's main location on Washington Avenue. "The next day I was working."

After just a few construction jobs, he quickly landed the job at the Inn of the Anasazi, and proceeded to work there for six years until he had a fight with his manager. Since then, his options have dwindled.

He says he couldn't lean on his brother for help due to a falling-out with his sister-in-law. "But he's always checking on me. Always, always, always," he says.

Now Rodriguez follows the same circuit dozens of other homeless immigrants follow: Leave the Salvation Army's emergency shelter - or the arroyo - at 6 am, walk to the Burger King on St. Francis Drive, walk back to De Vargas Park where day laborers gather and coffee and snacks are served by volunteers with Los Amigos del Parque, then lunch at any of several locations that offer free food, dinner back at the Salvation Army at 5 pm, and then relax at the public library until it closes at 9 pm on weekdays. "You can stay here, you get a book. You're not really doing anything, but at least you're inside," Rodriguez says. "No one says anything."

On the weekends, Ashbaugh Park, on Cerrillos Road next to Fire Station 3, becomes a stop on the homeless immigrant circuit. On a recent Sunday it's



Alejandro Moreno Cortez, aka El Capitan, follows the same circuit as many homeless immigrant men in Santa Fe: looking for food, work and shelter, and often resorting to sleeping alongside the Santa Fe River. Photo credit: Ursula Coyote



Photo credit: Photos: David Alire Garcia

both raining and cold, but volunteers Kent Hayhurst and his wife, Becca, aren't deterred. The couple distributes lunch bags to the homeless, just as they've done for the past seven years.

Later in the day, Hayhurst, the pastor of Santa Fe Church of Christ, will estimate that 20 percent of the 150 people served are immigrants.

On a folding table next to Hayhurst's white van, men trickle in, grabbing one brown bag each. The bags contain a container of vegetable beef soup, a banana, two rolls, cookies, a napkin and a spoon. Cups of hot apple cider are also available.

After he snags a baggie, Oscar Rodriguez dodges raindrops and jogs over to his friend Sergio Dominguez' beat-up gray Toyota Camry in the park's parking lot. Dominguez sits in the driver's seat, and Rodriguez jumps into the back seat. They scarf down their lunches, chat for a few minutes about the *pinche* freezing rain, then are off to the downtown library.

Reflecting on homeless immigrants' circuit - a circuit that closely follows the city's arroyos - Rodriguez notes there is always someplace to get food - but not work.

As for waiting, as many immigrants do, for jobs at De Vargas Park, Rodriguez just rolls his eyes.

"I don't see any future there in the park," he says. "It's never stable work. You could work one day, then nothing for weeks."

It's 8:27 am and De Vargas Park is a winter wonderland. Fat, wet snowflakes fall down and everything is becoming covered, including *los jornaleros* huddled in groups along the sidewalk. The day laborers who gather here each morning are half hidden as the white stuff keeps coming, brown faces hidden by oversized hoods and form-fitting knit caps.

El Capitan stands on the sidewalk, protected from the snow by a heavy jacket and baseball cap with a hood over it. He says he hasn't had any work in four



The Santa Fe River, from downtown to St. Francis Drive, shows many signs of life, even when no one is around. Well-traveled tracks in the snow follow pockets of discarded beer cans, random pieces of carpet and items of clothing, even a sleeping bag in a storm drain.



Jose Luis Villa knows the risks of being homeless, but says there is an upside as well: "The street is like a freedom you feel in your heart," he says as he walks away from the Salvation Army parking lot. "It would be better if we all had softer hearts, just like sometimes it's better to walk the street." Photo credit: David Alire Garcia

weeks. Hands in his pockets, "El Capi," as he's often called, says he's been floating in and out of homelessness since he first came to Santa Fe seven years ago. He says he rented an apartment for a long stretch, but couldn't afford it when construction jobs dried up.

According to Santa Fe employment statistics from the New Mexico Department of Labor's Economic Research and Analysis Bureau, the availability of construction work can vary widely throughout the year. In January and February of last year, for example, there were more than 400 fewer construction jobs than there were in July and August. *Los jornaleros* are most likely to be the first ones impacted by a downturn in the labor market for construction work, according to former Department of Labor economist Gerry Bradley.

El Capitan spends time every day waiting for a day's work on the sidewalk at De Vargas Park. And he bristles at familiar stereotypes. "I know a lot of people think that we don't want to work," he says as he looks out on the empty street, no trucks pulling up to hire workers. "But that's not it. You come here every day looking for work. Sometimes it comes, sometimes it doesn't."

Oscar Rodriguez' patience is tested in a different way. He says he's waiting for a tax identification number to arrive at his brother's mailbox, then he'll try again to land a restaurant job. "That's the only way I won't suffer anymore," he says rubbing his eyes. "I'll get an apartment and be a completely new person. I just can't keep going like this. I'm so tired of this life."

Proper identification is needed for some situations. Jose Luis Villa says when it comes to construction work, Mexican foremen are more likely than their *guero* (Anglo) counterparts to pick up fellow immigrant workers and less concerned about proper papers.

On the other hand, Villa notes that he's worked for Mexican *patrones* who offer jobs at \$14 an hour but then only pay \$8 per hour.

Why would they discriminate against their own kind? "Because they know that we're in bad shape. The truth is we're illegal, but it's not right," he says. "Work

should be sacred."

Housing isn't sacred either. When Sergio Dominguez, an itinerant Chihuahua-native who says he's been coming to Santa Fe since 1985, first got to Santa Fe, he says he slept with approximately 20 other *Mexicanos* under a bridge.

On this day, he's six days into a coveted spot at St. Elizabeth Shelter near the construction-ridden Railyard.

Nonetheless, all is not well: A few days ago, Dominguez says, he badly sprained his right forearm. "I slipped on the ice and fell backwards." He was treated at St. Vincent Regional Medical Center, given X-rays and a brace at no charge, but is still in pain.

Dominguez has his own car, which he says often doubles as a room. On this particular night, he parks it along Alarid Street before he snuffs out a cigarette and proceeds to St. Elizabeth's front door to check in for the night.

Deborah Tang, director of St. Elizabeth Shelter as well as co-chairwoman of the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness, describes the shelter's mission simply:

"Our goal here is to really be able to move people from living on the street into housing," she says. More broadly: "Housing should be a right in this country."

Jerry Gattis, the pastor and administrator of the Santa Fe Salvation Army, says many of the men his organization helps don't want to help themselves. "A lot of the folks we see simply do not want to work," he says. But when it comes to immigrant homeless men: "They work very hard. That's what we've come across."•

Providing more housing and ending homelessness once and for all is the namesake goal of the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness. But its executive director, Hank Hughes, a former director of St. Elizabeth, acknowledges that ending homelessness for immigrants will be an even steeper challenge.

"They're not eligible for federal housing programs if they're here illegally. So that makes it harder for them," he explains.

Hughes' organization's five-year plan to end homelessness in Santa Fe - which has been backed by Mayor David Coss - will rely, in large part, on federal grants from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development. The funding allows Hughes to maintain a database of services rendered, as well as provide funds for the city's homeless shelters.

The ultimate goal is to tap more resources; provide the homeless vouchers for apartments, for example, or even construct new housing that could be rented out cheaply. He says the Santa Fe Community Housing Trust has been asked to help with the latter.



Deborah Tang, executive director at St. Elizabeth, says the shelter does not track how many of its clients are immigrants, but believes the demographics are representative of Santa Fe. Photo credit: David Alire Garcia



St. Elizabeth Shelter on Alarid Street is the only homeless shelter in northern New Mexico. It serves more than 2,000 men, women and children each year by

providing 35,000 nights of shelter and 31,000 meals, among other resources. Its annual operating budget is approximately \$1 million, half of which comes from donations. According to the shelter's mission statement, "All services are provided to those in need without discrimination of any kind."•

"For me, I'm trying to accomplish a measure of social justice," Coss says in an interview, noting that the city will commit "close to \$1 million" for the five-year plan. "I just don't think we should have such a significant homeless population in a city like ours." Coss, a staunch immigrant advocate, acknowledges that homelessness affects immigrants differently.

"It's a multifaceted problem when it involves immigrants because you're going to have all the social, economic and substance abuse issues, plus you've got the immigration status and language issue on top of that," he says. He makes a point of saying that eventual city-funded vouchers for housing for the homeless will be open to non-citizens.

That will provide better options for homeless immigrants in the future. Hughes adds that there are plans for an expanded overflow shelter that would be open to all.

"The federal housing programs are not available to immigrants if they are not legal," he repeats, "but we're going to try to make some of it not federally funded."

He takes a step back to explain that the need for housing is paramount. "It needs to be the first thing [we do] because without housing people can't get jobs or work on other problems in their lives," Hughes says.

It's approximately 10 am and the doors are opening at St. Elizabeth's resource center where, twice a week, there is an early buffet-style lunch. Men line up outside the door, file in and sign in when the doors open. The stench of urine permeates the line. A middle-aged Anglo man with a pony-tail asks for names and veteran status. As several immigrants get to the makeshift registration desk, the man practices his Spanish. "Tu nombre?" he asks. 'Mendez, Jose,' comes the first answer. As soon as each man signs in, he then hits the buffet.

Small groups of Anglo men, native-born Hispanic men and Spanish-speaking immigrant men sit at their own tables. They don't seem to mix. In fact, the only thing that seems to bring them together is the fruit punch in Starbucks clear plastic cups sitting on the table before them.



Hank Hughes, executive director of the New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness, acknowledges that homeless immigrants who do not have legal status face greater challenges in finding housing. Photo credit: David Alire Garcia



Several homeless immigrants complain about how early they have to leave Salvation Army's overflow emergency shelter (6 am) and how late they can enter (10 pm). "It would be much better if they had dinner at 8 pm and then let people go to sleep after that,"• Sergio Dominguez says.

Just outside, a long table has been set up with a pile of clothes and assorted shoes and boots underneath. There's also a small box with clean, white underwear just waiting to get picked through. These are some of the resources St. Elizabeth's resource center is offering, billed as "a point of first contact with the more chronic street homeless population," according to the shelter's brochure.

The shelter also offers a do-it-yourself laundry service. On a recent Friday, Jose Lopez is about to begin washing his clothes in the cramped laundry room, dumping dirty clothes on the floor from a black plastic bag.

"I don't live here now, but I come here to eat and do my laundry because where I'm living now I don't have any water," Lopez says.

The Chihuahua-native arrived in Santa Fe during the summer of 2005 when construction work was plentiful, he says. Back then, he lived in an apartment. But after a prolonged period of no work last year, he came to live in the shelter for 30 days. A couple months ago, he scraped together money to purchase a camper trailer he keeps just off of Airport Road. When he can save up a little more, he says, he's going to have the utilities connected.

While homeless men tend to stay in small groups with others just like them at the shelters, in their vehicles or at the parks their demographic makeup, advocates say, closely mirrors the racial and ethnic diversity of Santa Fe itself.

"I'd say we reflect the population of Santa Fe," Tang says from behind her second-floor office desk, above the shelter's dormitory. "Sure, we have immigrants," she adds. She's just not sure how many.

Tang notes that among the approximately 2,000 homeless individuals the shelter served last year, approximately half were Hispanic. But she's not sure how many of them are immigrant versus native-born, in part because shelter staff doesn't ask. "We don't have anything that has to do with their [immigration] status," she says. "We just don't keep those numbers."

As for the city's overall homeless population, Tang mentions that in February of last year a census was taken with the help of all the agencies that work with the homeless. Its snapshot finding: 917 homeless people call Santa Fe home.

Lopez, meanwhile, is waiting for his new boss to arrive and pick him up. He's got plans to visit his wife and two children, who are still in Mexico. In the meantime, his goals are "to work and behave myself," he says with a smile.

The alternative to doing so, as most homeless know, can be lethal.



Jose Lopez saved his money to purchase a camper trailer in which he now lives, but he uses St. Elizabeth's laundry facilities because he still has no utilities. Photo credit: David Alire Garcia

Homeless advocates and members of The New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness (www.nmceh.org) will rally at the Roundhouse from 10:30 to 11 am on Thursday, Jan. 17 at the east lobby entrance. They also will be lobbying legislators on several housing-funding initiatives.

always had a tiny *movida* going on," Taub adds. She says she'd occasionally give Cuba a ride since he often struggled with pain in his legs. It was well known that he was an alcoholic and a heroin addict, but many also recount Cuba's good qualities.

"We were friends and he gave me lots of advice," Jose Luis Villa says. "I used to have a girlfriend and he told me that she was a such a good woman and that she respected me. But he lied to me!" Villa says with a hearty laugh. "Because she left me."

Villa says he would often encourage Cuba to work, but to no avail. "I told him, 'Cuba, you speak good English. Cuba, you can find work because there are a lot of people who don't speak English and *patrones* often come looking for workers who are bilingual,'" Villa recalls. "He'd say, 'Oh no, *chico*. I don't need to work. Over here the Mexicans will take care of me,'" he says in his best Cuban accent.

By all accounts, Cuba's *Mexicano* friends did just that - giving him '*una quarter, un*

El Capitan opens his nearly empty, leather wallet to show off a tattered picture of his friend Cuba. Wearing a black cap and a denim jacket in the photo, Cuba was in his late 40s when he died. He called the streets and arroyos of Santa Fe home for nearly 20 years.

"This is him. This is Cuba," El Capitan says wistfully. "He was my best friend." He explains that Cuba's given name was Jose Pedre Gonzalez, "but everyone knew him as just Cuba." The nickname was shorthand for his nationality.

Mara Taub, co-founder of Los Amigos del Parque, a local human rights group that provides food and support for the day laborers that gather at De Vargas Park, also remembers Cuba well.

"He was a very nice, friendly guy who lived under the bridge," she says, referring to the bridge at the intersection of Guadalupe and East Alameda streets. "But he

All of the interviews with the immigrant men for this story were conducted in Spanish. Their quotes were then translated into English by the author.

peso,' as Villa puts it - but in the end it wasn't enough.



El Capitan still carries a photo of his friend, Cuba, who died on the streets; a descansos and other charms mark the spot where his body was found. Photo credit: David Alire Garcia

Taub provides the grim, final details: "He died alone, under the bridge with a needle in his arm" sometime in late-March 2005. Immediately afterward, some of Cuba's friends from Los Amigos, as well as a priest and deacon from Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, erected a simple wooden cross, or *descanso*, on the spot under the bridge where his body was found. Nearly three years later, it is still well-maintained.

Cuba, of course, is not the only homeless person to die in Santa Fe. The day after Christmas, 51-year-old Geronimo Garcia was found dead just behind Fairview Cemetery with only a thin blanket covering him; he was the 24th homeless death in Santa Fe in 2007.

While Garcia wasn't an immigrant, his well-publicized death serves as a cautionary tale to those who live on the outside. Freezing to death is a real concern, one Sergio Dominguez thinks of on winter mornings when the Salvation Army empties its emergency shelter by 6 am and "it's still dark and the streets are still frozen."

"Not even the birds or dogs are thrown outside at that time," he says with a sigh. "We should all be equal, but we're treated worse than dogs."