

---

Study Reveals “Underground System” for Exploiting Undocumented Migrants

02/06/2015



In the study, recently published in the journal *Ethnicities*, UO Prof. Gerardo Sandoval says that many undocumented workers accept the system of exploitation because they are trying to escape from situations that are even more desperate and they see opportunities to help their families.

“Our investigation sheds light on a problem that exists throughout the United States. It’s related to the way in which the communities of undocumented foreigners are exploited and taken advantage of,” he told Efe.

Sandoval, a professor of planning, public policy and management, came to this conclusion while working with UO colleague Edward M. Olivos to jointly analyze the consequences of the massive May 12, 1988, raid on the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa.

Sandoval focused on that event because it was the largest immigration raid in the country’s history – more than 900 people were detained and about 400 were deported – and because the majority of the immigrants affected by it came from El Rosario, Guatemala, near the area where Sandoval grew up.

“When I saw that connection, it really interested me,” he said.

Many of the detained and deported Guatemalans in Iowa seven years ago had been agricultural workers in their homeland, where they had suffered “harsh working conditions and exploitation

on coffee and flower plantations.”

And when they arrived in Postville, an “underground system” based on “loan practices, sending money and recruitment of unauthorized workers” recreated in that town many of the same labor and social conditions that the immigrants were trying to leave behind them.

In his study, Sandoval details how the “network of shadow connections,” defined as an “informal system to provide work to undocumented” migrants, functioned at the Postville meatpacking plant to recruit and attract undocumented workers with the goal of “creating a flow of low-income workers” for that company.

Despite being aware of their serious situation, the undocumented workers accepted it because “in that way they could improve the lives of their families and educate their children.”

In the case of El Rosario, the Guatemalans from that town who worked in Postville were sending money back to their relatives and friends, causing significant economic growth there.

Seven years after the raid, neither Postville nor El Rosario has economically recovered, the study found.

---