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KEY FACTS

- Deportations and 'pseudo-voluntary returns' from the U.S. have prompted the emergence of a large new Mexican return diaspora characterized by a high presence of girls, boys and adolescents returning with a family member or members.
- Some children were born in Mexico and for them going back is a return there. Others were born in the U.S. and are arriving in Mexico for the first time.
- They face a range of health challenges, some of which stem from family separation and cultural readjustment.
- The absence of programs of linguistic, social, cultural and pedagogical transition between the U.S. and Mexican education systems means that children face stigma, bullying and the pathologization of difference.

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Life After Deportation: The Health and Education of the Children of Mexican Migrants Expelled from the United States

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Immigration Initiative at Harvard Policy Brief 9.



Introduction

Since the 1990's, the line between criminal and immigration law has become increasingly blurred in the United States. This development has gone hand-in-hand with an increase in deportation policies. [1] This issue brief traces the impacts of these policies on the health and education of the children of Mexicans who are expelled from the United States or who migrate back with their families 'voluntarily' for fear of this occurring. It demonstrates how immigration containment policies can separate and destroy families, with serious effects on the mental and emotional health of child and adolescent members. The brief concludes with number of policy recommendations to address the issues raised within.

Background

Deportation is a process whereby certain immigrant populations are labelled 'undesirable' and, as such, considered fit to be sent back to their countries of origin. [2] A number of offences are coupled with

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automatic deportation under U.S. immigration law—immigrants can be deported for not having documents in addition to a range of non-violent, minor offences including using a false social security number to work, or driving without a license. [3]

Between 2009 and 2016, the U.S. deported more than 3 million Mexicans. An additional 1.4 million Mexicans [4] pre-emptively undertook what is considered to be ‘voluntary return’ to Mexico—returning not because of being forcibly returned, but for other reasons, such a fear of being deported or losing a previously-held regular status (this number does not include those migrants who did not enter and/or leave Mexico through official border ports). [5] In recognition of the forced nature of these movements—pushed as they are by the hostile and coercive environment that targets those without papers—this brief refers to such movements as ‘pseudo-voluntary returns’. [6]

Deportations and ‘pseudo-voluntary returns’ have prompted the emergence of a new Mexican return diaspora, that is, individuals returning to their country of origin, often accompanied by their children. In addition to its large size, the high presence of girls, boys and adolescents distinguishes this diaspora from previous ones. More than 900,000 minors returned to Mexico in 2019. [7] Some of these children were born in Mexico and for them going back is a return there. Others were born in the U.S. and are arriving in Mexico for the first time.

Sometimes, the move to Mexico brings with it additional challenges of family separation. The child might migrate with one parent, while the other remains in the U.S. to continue sending remittances to the family. In this case, the child experiences a double mourning: for the rupture with the life that they were forced to leave in the U.S., and for the absence of the parent who remains there. In other words, the geographical distance is accompanied by an emotional distancing.

Of course, COVID-19 has had an impact. The pandemic did not stop the U.S. from continuing forced expulsions, through which the country deported more than 10,000 Mexican migrants between January and April 2020 alone. [8]

The volume of returns has brought important challenges related to the labor reintegration of the adult population and the educational (re)insertion of children and youth. After spending all or most of their lives in the U.S. and entering Mexico under circumstances that are often traumatic, the children face the challenge of (re)inserting themselves into an educational system that is ill-prepared

to receive them. This has significant consequences on their socio-educational development and on their mental and emotional health. [9]

Return to Oaxaca

Located in the southwest of Mexico, the State of Oaxaca is one of the most affected by the return of Mexican nationals. Being the federal entity with the highest number of undocumented migrants from the U.S., [10] Oaxaca ranks second nationally in terms of the number of Mexicans deported. [11] (Of the 658,000 deportations of Mexican migrants carried out under the Trump administration between 2017 and 2020, more than 60,600 were Oaxacan.) [12] During the pandemic, Oaxaca has also been a key recipient in terms of deportations: in March 2020, when the U.S. was beginning to record a high number of infections and deaths from COVID-19, more than 4,000 Oaxacan migrants were deported. [13]



Methodology

The data presented in this brief stem from a qualitative research project which had two main components: (i) a review of literature and statistical data on U.S.-Mexico-Oaxaca migration and deportation, and (ii) ethnographic fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted from 2018-2020 in different municipalities and communities of the Valles Centrales, Sierra Norte and Mixteca Alta regions of Oaxaca which are classified as enclaves with high rates of migrant expulsions and child-accompanied return migration. The data presented in this brief stem from a qualitative research project which had two main components: (i) a review of literature and statistical data on U.S.-Mexico-Oaxaca migration and deportation, and (ii) ethnographic fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted from 2018-2020 in different municipalities and communities of the Valles Centrales, Sierra Norte and Mixteca Alta regions of Oaxaca which are classified as enclaves with high rates of migrant expulsions and child-accompanied return migration.

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Access to research participants was mediated via seven educational institutions covering primary (5-11 years), secondary (12-14 years) and upper secondary (15-17 years) education in districts with high migrant populations. 122 girls, boys and adolescents between the ages of 6 and 16 who arrived in Oaxaca from the U.S. in the period 2017-2020 were registered in these institutions. Of the total sample, 68 of them were born in the U.S. and arrived in Mexico between the ages of 8 and 15 while the remaining 54 were born in Mexico, migrated to the U.S. aged between 0 and 3 years, and returned between the ages of 8 and 15 years. Their places of origin in the U.S. were Arizona, California, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Washington.

The ethnographic research included participant and non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and discussion groups. A total of 97 interviews were conducted with girls, boys and adolescents (no.=52) and parents (no.=27) who were members of families affected by deportation and/or by the deportation status of any of their family members. Interviews (no.=18) and discussion groups (no.=3) were also carried out with teachers who had students from the U.S. in their classrooms to analyze how they interpreted their educational experiences. We also conducted discussion groups (no.=3) with the girls, boys and adolescents.

Findings: Health Effects on the Children of Deported Parents

The migration of children and adolescents as a result of the forced or 'pseudo voluntary return' of a parent or parents is a situation beyond their control. This experience of losing control over their lives (the sense of 'ontological security' which has been shown to be

important to young people's wellbeing), constitutes one of the main risk elements in the appearance of mental and emotional health problems. [14] The loss of control acts as a trigger for frustration, resentment, insecurity and fear, which can lead to major behavioral and maladjustment problems. The change of environment that most often occurs against their will results in multiple ruptures. Children and adolescents experience migratory grief over the loss of friends, school, language, culture, land, landscapes and social status. As Madison, [15] one of the study participants, remarked,

'In Mexico everything is different. Back in the United States, my school was bigger ... a bus would pick me up, ... we arrived at the cafeteria and had breakfast together. But I don't know anything about my friends anymore. Later on in the day, at five o'clock, we would go and play in a very large park. I only spoke English. It's a problem for me here because I hardly know Spanish and well ... everything is different for me, it is very difficult ... I really miss it back there.'

As well as friendships, for children and adolescents moving to Mexico from the United States, the family is often a key site of rupture.

Effects on Family: Separation, Disruption and Disillusionment

Family separation due to deportation involves the deployment of strategies to diversify economic risk: the parent who remains in the U.S. dedicates themselves completely to work and does not have time to care for their offspring. The child or children are cared for by the parent returned to Mexico and by their family networks there. Lucila, the mother of a family impacted by deportation, explained,

'I brought my children here because my husband works all the time over there, he has various jobs ... and from there he sent us to live here ... things are very difficult over there, we can't manage. But for economic reasons, we decided that he better stay in the United States.'

Faced with such a scenario, children and adolescents in the research showed mixed feelings. Aware of the situation of poverty in Mexico, they wanted their parent to stay in the United States to send remittances to the family, however, the weight of absence also awakened a desire for their return to achieve family reunification in Mexico. Several participants expressed the view that they would rather face poverty than face a life without one or both of their parents.

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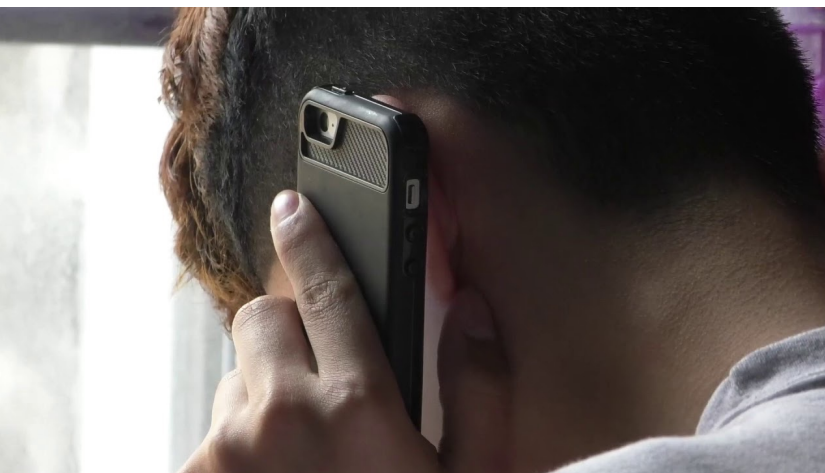
Lizbeth explained,

'I haven't seen my dad for several years ... he is in North Carolina. I miss him a lot and I do cry because, well, just imagine what it's like to grow up without your dad. My mom tells me that we need him to be there to send us the money, so we can survive ourselves, but ... I don't mind being poorer so as not to grow up without my dad, I don't care about material things.'

Cases in our research in which the parent who remained in the U.S. was eventually deported rarely led to a positive story of family reunification. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, deported migrants often found themselves in conditions of poverty in Mexico. These conditions, which prompted their initial migration to the United States, now caused some to re-migrate post-return to other parts of the country, or even to attempt a new crossing to the United States. This strategy of re-emigration in search of work opportunities was sometimes pursued by both parents. This meant leaving the children in the care of grandparents and uncles which caused a rupture in the nuclear family.

Secondly, family reunification in Mexico was often thwarted due to the deterioration of the emotional ties between the parents, or parents and children, during periods of absence across borders. The thwarted desire for family reunification can trigger strong emotional imbalances in girls, boys and adolescents. Charlie explained,

'I hadn't seen my father for several years ... he stayed there working in the United States. So, I was very sad because I didn't see my father, but ... I had the illusion that now ... because they deported him, that I was going to see him. And yes, we were with him, but ... he went to cross there again ... I no longer see him. Then I got very sick and ... the doctor told me that I had depression because ... I don't see my dad again.'



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The mental and emotional discomfort is aggravated by the situation faced in the new school environment.

Effects on School and Social Life: Pathologizing Difference

Being the child of deported parents creates a sense of stigma that causes isolation and exclusion. [16] This not only has repercussions on the mental and emotional health of these girls, boys and adolescents, but also impacts their process of (re)insertion into school in Mexico, especially concerning the construction of new friendships. Deportation is a taboo subject, which means that many children try, at all costs, to hide their status as children of deported parents and/or as deported. This situation of permanent hiding causes sadness, tension, insecurity and fear that they may be 'discovered'. When this happens, one of the first emotions experienced is shame. This is understood as a self-critical emotion through which one's life situation is negatively evaluated, causing the person to devalue themselves at a high psychological cost. [17]

Along with shame, one of the elements that most harms children and adolescents from the United States in Mexican schools is the pathologizing of difference. [18] In our research, we encountered several cases in which girls, boys and adolescents born and/or raised in the United States and educated in the schools of its educational system were diagnosed with dyslexia and low intellectual abilities. This was usually due to their inability to speak and write in Spanish and understand the social and cultural codes on which Mexican society is based, particularly that of Oaxaca. During fieldwork in one of the schools, we registered the case of a girl who had recently arrived from the United States. She had been born and lived there until she was 10 years old. Schooled throughout her life in the U.S. educational system, she worked exclusively in English and did not speak Spanish, the language of instruction and communication in Mexican schools. Her teacher, who did not know of the girl's origin and life trajectory, detected limitations in writing and speaking Spanish. Her teacher, however, did not look into the

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reasons for these limitations. This led her to put together a report addressed to the institution's Principal. She mistakenly diagnosed that the girl had dyslexia.

Other teachers observed in our research engaged in practices that normalized learning difficulties among children who had migrated from the United States. This included seeing 'slowness' as a trait inherent of migrant students, a view that was made manifest in statements such as 'they isolate themselves', 'they do not understand', 'they are slow', and 'they are distracted'. This pathologizing disregards previous migratory and educational experience that make the (re)educational insertion of these girls, boys and adolescents differ from those of other children, and also erases the fact many such differences (such as knowledge of the English language) can be considered strengths. [19]

These 'diagnoses' have to do with the difficulties that these students actually experience in the face of an educational system built on Mexican linguistic and cultural parameters—obviously very different from those on which the American educational system from which they come is sustained—into which they are not adequately incorporated through linguistic, cultural and pedagogical transition programs. There were, nevertheless, cases of teachers who were aware of situation of these girls, boys, and adolescents because they themselves had experienced migration. A teacher called Carlos explained,

'When I see them, I think of my own experience and then ... I try to think about what happened to me, that migration thing, when I was a child ... This is what has made me pay attention to this type of issues.'

Despite having the best intentions to promote the inclusion of these students, these teachers do not have the necessary tools to do so, moreover they are constrained by the rigid structures of the school system. Anaís explained,

'What I have done is gather them at recess time one day, so that they can sit ... know that they are in the same boat... They get together and talk, they start talking in English. That is what I have tried ... obviously, there are many things to do, but I do not know how to do it, I do not have the training and the Principal's Office does not let me either.'

The pathologizing of the cultural and linguistic identity of these girls, boys and adolescents and, derived from it, the questioning of their intellectual capacity causes strong damage to their self-esteem. Insecurity and lack of confidence are among the factors that most negatively impact their mental and emotional well-being. This inevitably affects their school performance.

“ Sometimes they hit me, and they tell me to return to the United States ...that I am a gringo and all that ... they also tell me that they probably deported my mother because she must have done something bad there.”

Edwin explained,

'My teacher tells me that I am not like other children because ... I come from the United States, I am American, and ... he says that I am late in my homework and ... yes, it is true, I'm not the same because it takes me a while to do my homework, because I was born there, and I don't know Spanish.'

One result of their pathologizing as 'slow learners' is the onset of apathy and a lack of motivation to study and progress academically. The identification of these students as different—socially, culturally and linguistically—can also lead to school bullying. A student called John described his experience of this,

'Sometimes they hit me, and they tell me to return to the United States, ask what I'm doing here, that I am not Mexican, that I am American, that I am a gringo and all that ... and well ... they also tell me that they probably deported my mother because she must have done something bad there.'

Most children and adolescents in this position do not have psychologists. And when they do, we found the care they received to be sporadic and insufficient. Poor mental health and emotional problems remain systemic due to the lack of psychological care both outside of and especially *within* educational institutions.

Policy Recommendations

Attention to the child and adolescent population that enters Mexico from the United States as a consequence of the deportation or 'pseudo voluntary return' of their parents should be a priority issue, especially as it concerns the health and education outcomes of minors. We recommend the creation of a comprehensive plan aimed at this population which lays out specific actions under the pillars of health and education.



of the children's (re)insertion into school, where the stigma of being the child of deported parents causes tensions and insecurities. This, coupled with the lack of preparedness of the Mexican educational system to adequately (re)insert this population into its educational institutions, takes a heavy toll on an already vulnerable population.

This brief has recommended the development of transition programs to facilitate the educational (re)insertion of students from the United States into Mexico. In the absence of programs of linguistic, social, cultural and pedagogical transition between the U.S. and Mexican educational systems, harmful practices of pathologization, as outlined in this brief, will remain the answer to diversity.

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Under the health pillar, we recommend the incorporation of mental health professionals in all educational institutions in Mexico and the provision of training to care for children and adolescents affected by migration.

Under the education pillar, we recommend the development of an Educational Welcome Protocol that would provide programming and resources for students from the U.S. educational system to develop the linguistic, social and cultural transitions necessary to (re)insert themselves adequately into the Mexican educational system. In parallel with the Welcome Protocol, students should be able to join the regular classrooms of Mexican schools, where it is essential to have trained teachers to offer them adequate educational attention. For this, it is essential that Mexican teacher training programs incorporate compulsory modules on care for migrant students, as well as content on intercultural education and pedagogy.

Finally, it should also be recognized that the presence in Mexico of students from the United States with specific and differential characteristics is the result of binational migratory dynamics that have been sustained for decades between both countries. A binational responsibility must therefore be recognized in the future well-being and education of the children of Mexican migrants. In this vein, we recommend the creation of binational policies and programs.

Conclusion

This brief has shown that children and adolescents who migrate to Mexico from the United States involuntarily, as a consequence of the deportation or 'pseudo-voluntary return' of their parents, face a number of health and education challenges. Problems experienced within the family at once affect and are affected by the problems faced in the process

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This issue brief is also available in Spanish.

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