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Return Migration and the Challenges of Reintegration in Mexico

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Executive Summary

Between 2005 and 2018, more than 3 million undocumented Mexicans living in the United States returned to Mexico.[1] With deportation efforts extending to the interior over this period, many of these returnees are adult members of a so-called 1.5 generation, individuals who left Mexico as young children and spent their formative years in the United States before being newly uprooted and returned to the country of their birth. Whether repatriated as a result of removal proceedings or voluntarily deciding to relocate, they arrive equipped with abundant human and social capital, a by-product of their US education, employment, social networks and cultural experiences. Upon arrival, however, they encounter a formidable set of logistical, economic, socio-cultural and psychological challenges that constrain their ability to harness their assets, develop new skills and integrate into Mexican society.

The US and Mexican governments have a shared stake in facilitating the incorporation of these returning migrants. Denied the opportunity to build fulfilling and productive lives in Mexico, they are unable to provide for themselves or for their partners and children still living in the US. They become easy prey for organized crime and are tempted to re-migrate. But given half a chance, they are determined to make their mark, enriching the economic and social fabric of contemporary Mexico.

This report synthesizes core findings of a survey and accompanying interviews we conducted with 413 returning Mexican migrants between June 2018 and June 2019 as members of the oral history project, Migration Encounters. Divided into five parts, the report begins with a brief overview of evolving trends in migration between Mexico and the US. The second section provides a socio-demographic profile of survey respondents and interviewees. In the following two sections, we discuss the social and human capital that members of the 1.5 generation of returning migrants bring to Mexico and the obstacles they face upon arrival. Inviting the Mexican and US governments to recognize the perils of ignoring the challenges these returnees face and the promise of harnessing their skills and talents, the report concludes by outlining a set of policy recommendations aimed at facilitating their incorporation.

I. Introduction

Migration between Mexico and the United States has deep historical roots, stretching back to the foundation of the United States. For much of contemporary history, open borders allowed a dominant pattern of migration as Mexicans, mostly adult males, traveled to the United States to work in agricultural jobs and returned home periodically to visit their families.

The passage of successive immigration reform legislation beginning in the late 1960s with the Hart-Celler Act, however, established immigration quotas and made these well-established patterns of circular migration generally illegal for subsequent generations of Mexicans. But the increasing gap in relative economic opportunities between the two countries continued to attract undocumented entry of Mexican males into the US, even in the face of increasingly stringent border enforcement. The decision to migrate to the US was then made after weighing the economic opportunities of US jobs against the risk of trouble with US law enforcement and the hardship of long periods separated from family. Violence and corruption in Mexican law enforcement added a new push factor,

further incentivizing Mexican migration to the US. Without any real attempts to address these push factors by either country, the region experienced rapid growth in the number of undocumented Mexicans seeking opportunities in the US, more permanent settlement of these migrants within the US, and ultimately, family members, wives and children, crossing the border to reunite with the original migrants and make homes in the US. By 2007 the estimated number of undocumented Mexicans living in the United States peaked at 6.9 million, representing 54% of all undocumented foreigners. (Passel et. al., 2019)

Beginning in the final years of the 20th century and escalating during the mid 2000s, a new phenomenon of out migration emerged. With removals and returns falling about two thirds from the peak of 2009 (DHS, 2008-2019), voluntary exit has increased and become the dominant form of exit (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). Interviews of these voluntary returnees attribute their decisions to a combination of homesickness, a desire for reverse family reunification, and the sense that a growing Mexican economy affords them opportunities that were not available to them at the time of their migration to the United States (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). At the same time, the flow of Mexicans to the US which peaked in 2000 at 770,000 per year, slowed to less than 100,000 in 2019 (Passel et. al., 2019), possibly due to the same economic reasons motivating returnees as well as growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the US and increased border security. Net migration became negative for the first time in history between 2005 and 2010 (Passel et. al, 2012). As a result, in 2017 the number of undocumented Mexicans living in the United States had fallen to 4.9 million, less than half of all undocumented foreigners in the country (Passel et. al, 2019). In the past several years, this pattern has shown signs of reversing. The Pew Research Center (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2021) estimates a small annual net positive immigration rate for the period 2013-2018 due to a decrease in Mexicans exiting the US with entrants remaining stable during the period. Further, Mexican apprehensions at the border have been increasing since 2017 for the first time since 2003, a signal that this positive rate may persist and even increase. In sum, even with changing patterns of immigration at the US southern border, Mexico remains the dominant source of immigrants both at the US border and in its interior.

II. Who are the Migrants?

This report draws on surveys and interviews conducted between June 2018 and June 2019 with 413 repatriated migrants in Mexico City. While the sample is not a random sample of returning migrants in Mexico City, much less Mexico, it provides a snapshot of a cohort. The surveys and interviews were conducted in a workspace near the Monument of the Revolution, in the downtown center and in close proximity to several call centers. Our sample looks similar to the full population of repatriated Mexicans in some ways (gender and age) but very different in others (time in the US). The returning migrants we talked to are overwhelmingly male (84%), not because undocumented migrants are overwhelmingly male but because run-ins with ICE occur at traffic stops, at work, at school, and in rare cases at jail, all places populated more by undocumented men than women. They are young, with a median age at return of 24, although the women were on average five years younger than the men (See Table 1).[2]

The repatriated migrants we spoke to stand out in terms of their longevity in the United States[3]. A large majority went to the US as children (82 %) and returned as adults. The median age at migration was 7 and median years in the US was 15.5. A majority spent more than half of their lives in the US. Even the folks who came to the US as

adults (16 or over) stayed for 11 years on average. Having grown roots in the US, the migrants we spoke to come back to Mexico with English language skills, human and social capital developed in the US, and strong ties to family members left behind. Therefore, they emerge as a group that has the potential to make enormous positive contributions to the Mexican economy and society, but at the same time, they are likely to face the most challenges assimilating and the biggest temptations to return. Also, for the most part, they are relatively recent returnees (55% returned to Mexico after 2013 and 30% since 2017), and as such, can give us an accurate picture of the challenges and opportunities that current repatriated migrants experience.

Table 1: Milestone Years for Returning Migrants

	All	Male	Female	Migration Age<16	Migration Age≥16
Age at Survey Date (Median)	29 years	29 years	26 years	27 years	40 years
Age at Migration (Median)	7 years	7 years	6.5 years	5 years	20 years
Years in US (Median)	15.5 years	17 years	11 years	17 years	11 years
Age at Return to Mexico (Median)	24 years	24.5 years	18 years	23 years	34 years
No. of observations	413	347	65	333	76

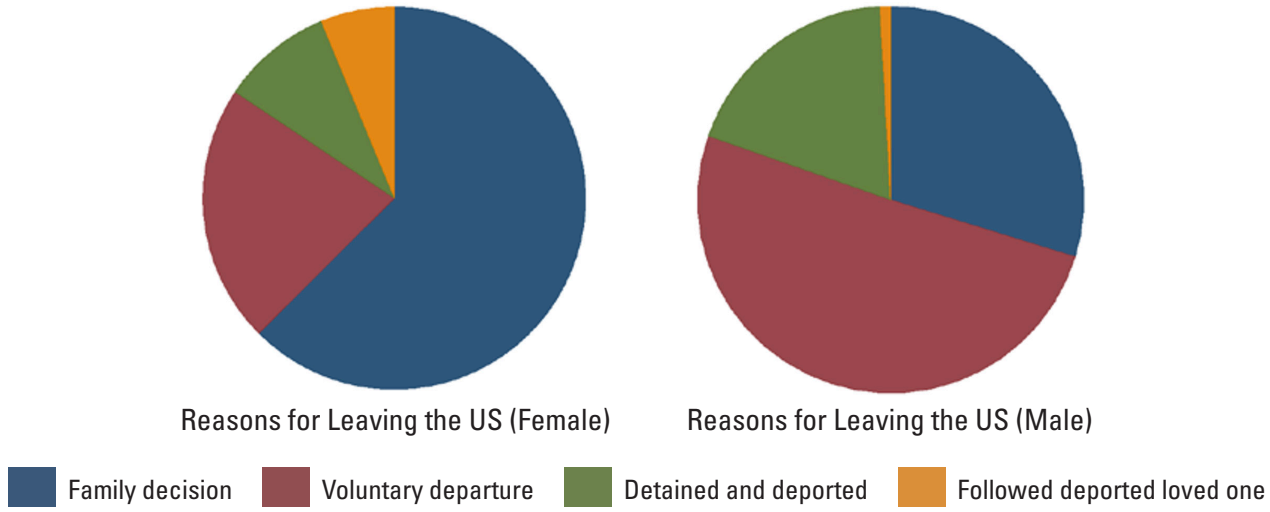
The circumstances of repatriation vary and differ markedly for men and women (See Figure 1). More than two thirds (69%) of men were either deported or accepted voluntary departure, an alternative form of expulsion that does not leave the permanent scar of deportation on the migrant's record, while also allowing those migrants, who have money to cover a bond, time to settle their affairs in the US and provide their own passage back to Mexico, Further, they may qualify for the opportunity to return to the US legally 10 years after their departure. The conditions surrounding these migrants' run-ins with ICE vary, with only 20% involving felonies and another 9% involving gang affiliation, meaning that more than 70% were repatriated to Mexico due to, at most, a misdemeanor[4]. In contrast, an equal percentage of women (69%) choose to return to Mexico, often to maintain familial ties with relatives departing for or living in Mexico, to find greater acceptance in the country of their birth, or to fulfill thwarted educational and career aspirations.

> "It was really stupid because I was driving my dad's car and I went to a friend's in downtown Seattle….I was coming back and I didn't have my driver's license with me, I forgot it that day. And so somebody I guess called the cops saying that maybe I looked suspicious or something, because the cops came, they got me, I didn't have my ID, the car wasn't under my name. And so they said that they were charging me with car prowling, which at the end they dropped because that was not the case. And yeah, that's what happened." —Josue

> "It was a constant fear of coming home and being told that, I don't know, your dad's not coming back or your mom's not coming back. And it did happen like that. Unfortunately, my father was working and he was raided. So he got taken away and then when I came back home one day from school, my mom told me. It was really hard." —Laila

"She asked me, 'So what's your plan? Are you going to be a waiter for the rest of your life?'...It really hit hard because I'd been trying to be somebody in life and I just couldn't....So that just cemented the idea I need to continue improving as a person, as a professional. I need to do something else, you know? And if this country's not going to be able to give me the opportunity that I know that I deserve, then I'm going to look for it somewhere else." —Luis

Figure 1: Reasons for Leaving the US by Sex



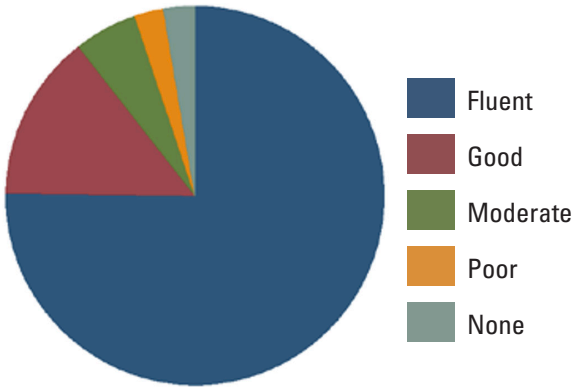
III. Assets they Bring

Repatriated migrants return with a wealth of talents, skills and experiences. Three quarters of our respondents were fluent in English, while only 10 percent reported moderate, poor or no English language skills (See Figure 2)[5]. The vast majority were educated in the United States. More than half graduated from a US high school and a quarter obtained a college degree. Despite their relatively young age at return, 81 percent worked in the US for an average of seven years (See Table 2).

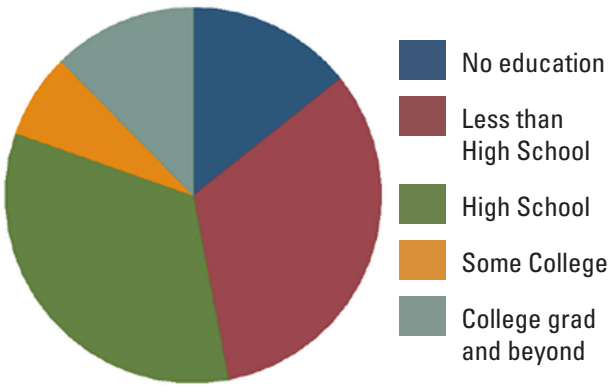
Roughly a third of all men plied a construction trade and a slightly greater percentage of both men and women worked in the hospitality industry. Several men built successful painting, landscaping, construction and transportation businesses. That operated legally, paid taxes, employed US workers, and, in at least one instance, worked on government contracts.

"But there, Indiana and Ohio, Florida and Mississippi, Texas, I was a preferred government contractor. And did they know I was illegal? Damn right they did." —Ben

Figure 2: Migrants' English Skills and US Financed Human Capital



Current English Skills (All)



Level of Education in United States after Migration

Table 2: Work on Both Sides of the Border

	All	Male	Female	Migration Age<16	Migration Age≥16
United States					
% who worked in the US	81.6%	86.7%	56.2%	78%	96.3%
% who worked in construction trades	27.2%	31.3%	5.8%	26.1%	28.1%
% who worked in hospitality	37.8%	39.6%	29%	37.7%	36.6%
Mexico (upon return)					
% who worked	91.7%	91.6%	92.7%	93.6%	83.8%
% who worked in construction	10.7%	12.7%	0%	10.4%	11%
% who worked in call centers	61.3%	61.8%	59.4%	69.3%	28.1%

They also return with social remittances—a constellation of practices, ideas and values cultivated through immersion in US society and sharpened by their immigrant identity and undocumented status. The migrants we interviewed relished the diversity they encountered in their schools and neighborhoods, and almost all of them developed close friendships with fellow immigrants and African, Asian and Caucasian Americans. They embraced US traditions of civic participation; as children they joined sports teams, middle and high school marching bands, debate societies, ecology clubs, and student government and as adults they volunteered with churches and neighborhood associations. Despite their personal fear of authorities, they often spoke admiringly of the rule of law and respect for human rights that govern US society. Several contrasted the violent neighborhoods or abusive relationships, that they had either fled from initially or subsequently returned to, with the safety and security they enjoyed in the United States. Even when they described facing discrimination as a result of their undocumented status, they underscored how the experiences heightened their determination to excel.

> "I've had some amazing experiences in my community college… You grow up being told that a certain race is such a way. I had so many black friends, white friends, Asian friends, and they were all super, super awesome. I don't know if it's just me, I don't know if I just got lucky, but I had so much fun." — Cuauhtemoc

IV. Challenges upon Return

Returning migrants confront myriad challenges that severely constrain their ability to adapt, integrate and thrive in Mexico. (see Figure 3). The migrants we spoke with return to Mexico ill prepared to assimilate. Often in the rush to leave or in the chaos of a sudden run-in with ICE, they do not have the time, opportunity, and forethought to collect the necessary documents required for new Mexican documentation. Even those who have time to prepare are not able to find accurate information about what is required. Upon arrival in Mexico, they encounter a seemingly indifferent government and an antagonistic society. There are very few government programs and only a handful of non-profit organizations dedicated to assisting returning migrants. Existing government programs are poorly advertised and resourced and difficult to access. NGOs are underfunded, struggle with outreach, and at times fail to cultivate trust among returnees. As a result, most of our respondents are left to their own devices to navigate a cumbersome bureaucracy and translate foreign social mores as they seek to certify their US educational credentials, obtain health care, qualify for social security, and develop a social network and forge an emotional support system.

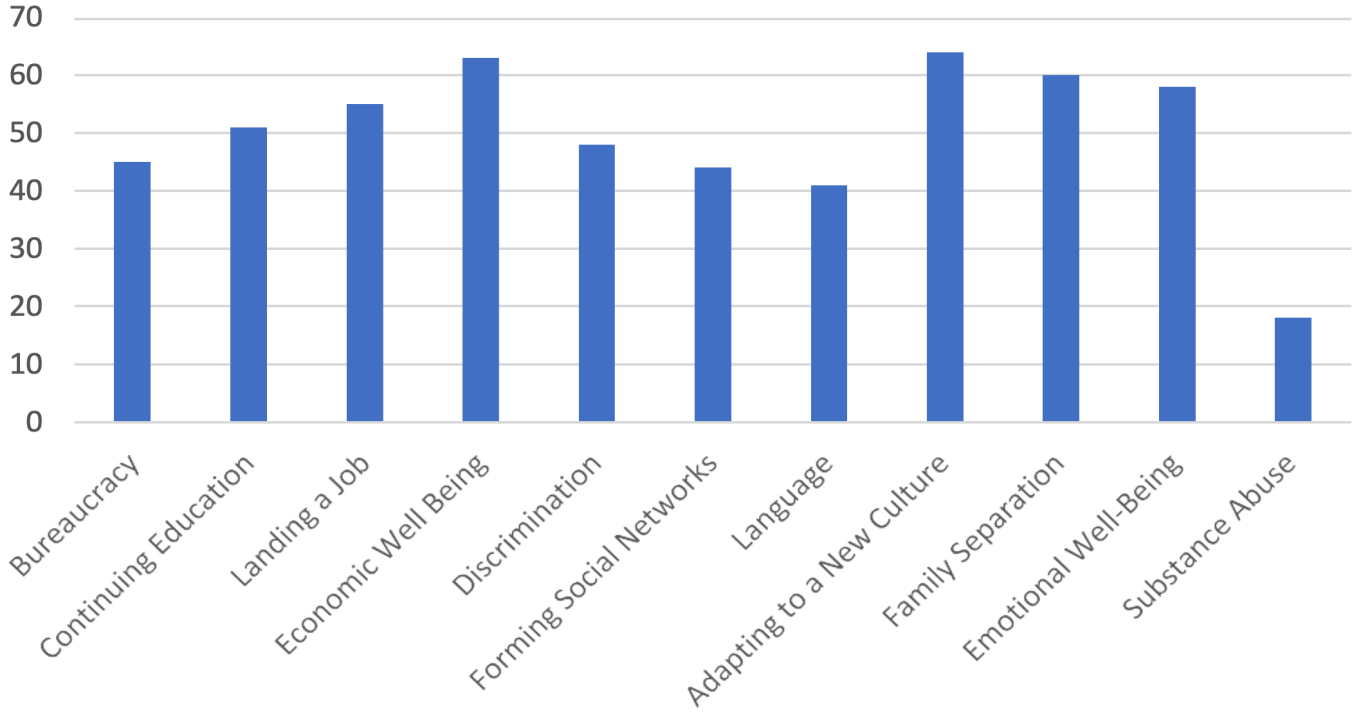
> " I'm a better civic person. Yeah. I'm more aware of things too. I'm more aware of my surroundings and the people around me, of the social issues too in a way. I never got involved or said things like, 'I want to contribute to have a better planet or a cleaner planet.' So, I got into a couple of groups like that in the US. Trying to clean your city, how to help people that are in worse positions than you are. I never did that, or I never had the opportunity here in Mexico. But, being over there, kind of like made me aware of those situations." —Adrian

> "I miss the security that you feel when you call 911 and in five minutes the cops are there." —Jeimmy

> "People like me. I'm driven man. I'm extremely driven. I think when you grow up with all of these people telling you that you can't, you want it more and you have this hunger inside of you that you want. You need it and you're going to make it. And I'm pretty sure I can run a lot of laps around all these fuckers that were born citizens." —Luisa

> "It just bothers me, this indifference from the government. They are very indifferent. They know for a fact, because they even have programs to help immigrants returning. But the fact is, it's just to make them look good, to sound good, just to get a job. When in reality they're not helping anything. All that money that is supposed to go to help people, they're pocketing it."— Juan

Figure 3: % of Respondents Facing Specified Challenge



A. Language Barriers

Forty percent of our sample struggle to express themselves in Spanish upon their return to Mexico. Given the fact that the vast majority migrated to the US as young children and grew up hearing and speaking Spanish only at home, this is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, their inability to communicate effectively in Spanish, their foreign accents, and their lack of familiarity with Mexican accents and colloquialisms, hinder their economic, cultural and social adaptation. Their job prospects are limited as are their opportunities to further their education. Commonly, respondents attributed their tendency to speak English and to hang out with fellow returnees at least partly to a language barrier, often describing being teased and even bullied because of their halting Spanish, foreign accents or linguistic missteps.

> "I was bullied at first. I remember…because my Spanish wasn't the best. When I got here, I had not practiced my Spanish in so long. I knew how to read and write, but my grammar was not the best either. I had [a] kindergarten education" —Luisa

B. Education

Many repatriated migrants aiming to complete high school or attend university upon return are stymied by the bureaucratic hurdles they encounter. Even those who collect their US high school transcripts run into two roadblocks, the first being that their records are either incomplete, incorrectly translated or improperly certified. Remedying

the situation often requires obtaining a power of attorney that is complicated to procure from Mexico. In 2015 the Mexican Department of Education (SEP) lifted the requirement that students enrolling in public schools ((Diario Oficial de la Federación 2015) produce notarized transcripts, yet other stringent requirements remain. The second roadblock involves the lack of equivalency between a US and a Mexican high school diploma. Mexican high school degree requirements are more rigorous than basic prerequisites for high school graduation in most US states and more closely aligned with an honors curriculum taken by US students seeking admission to a selective college or university. Unable to certify their US credentials and forced to repeat years of high school, university seems beyond reach, and many postpone, drop out or give up on the idea of studying in Mexico.

> "They tell you, 'Well, this [transcript] is not valuable right here.' It's like, for us, it's like telling us you never went to school down here. Well, what else can I do to prove to you? Yeah, it is kind of rare for someone to tell me my high school diploma is valuable down here, when I fought so hard to get my high school diploma." — Hugot

> "When I applied for Mexican universities, they told me I would have to restart my high school over and that my ACT and my SAT weren't accepted. I would have to do their admissions tests. So I applied to Australia and New Zealand and Canada, and I got in all three of them in various universities, and I chose Canada." —Melani

C. Employment

Completing the paperwork required to work in the private sector is cumbersome for Mexican citizens, but especially burdensome for repatriated migrants. Having grown up outside Mexico, they frequently return without several or, at times, any of the requisite documents. They may not possess a valid birth certificate; at times they don't know their CURP (a unique number given to every Mexican at birth); they need to get an official Mexican ID (a Voter ID, passport or license) in order to obtain an NSS, an official social security number/card; and they must procure a tax ID number (known as an RFC, or Registro Federal de Contribuyentes, number). Obtaining each requires navigating a bureaucratic maze that includes visits to different national and local government offices, a process that can drag on for months and even years, severely hampering an already difficult and frustrating job search.

> "And when I got here (Mexico), it's like, no paperwork, no driver's license, no identification. I had a harder time getting a driver's license, getting my voter registration, which is the main source of ID here, a tougher time here than I did getting ID in the United States. And I was illegal in the United States." —Ben

Once paperwork is secured, migrants face a foreign job market where they have little understanding of how to find job opportunities that fit their skills. The majority of survey respondents (55%) struggle to find employment, while even those who manage to do so, stress difficulties applying professional skills acquired in the United States to the Mexican labor force. Those who land jobs are mostly consigned to employment in a burgeoning call center industry that welcomes their English language skills and familiarity with US cultural conventions. The work is adequately paid relative to other jobs they might find, but requires long hours, imposes strict rules and offers little opportunity

for advancement. Those migrants who want to use the entrepreneurial skills they developed in the US are unable to find the start-up capital that was more accessible to them in the US through both governmental programs and small business loans.

D. Family Separation

A majority of returned migrants in our sample have relatives living in the US, and over a quarter have children who are US citizens (See Table 3). These separations create challenges on both sides of the border. For the migrants themselves, leaving behind close family members, children in particular, creates extreme sadness and despair, depriving them of an emotional support system. Their plight also triggers a ripple effect on families and communities left behind. The financial and emotional hardship returnees endure exacerbate the psychological, social and economic strains already felt by their US children, potentially impacting behavioral outcomes related to education, employment and crime. There is little recourse for these families as the US does not allow reentry to migrants, even for short visits, for at least ten years. Travel by minors to see deported parents requires acquiring a US passport which is bureaucratically complicated when one parent is confined to Mexico. US born children brought to Mexico by a repatriated Mexican parent while their other parent remains in the US also face serious bureaucratic hurdles. To continue their schooling, participate in extracurricular activities, and become eligible for government assistance, children over the age of 14 require a notarized birth certificate that an often-estranged parent is reluctant to provide.

> "I got here on March 15. And since it was election time, they stopped issuing the only identification that a Mexican citizen can have to do anything—to open a bank account, to rent a house, to get a passport, to get a driver's license. That identification we cannot get because they are in elections and we are not allowed to get in until the election is over, which is in July. Ever since March, I haven't been able to get an identification where I can reestablish my life precisely because I cannot open a bank account, I cannot get a job." —Juan A

> Everything is a disaster. I was two years in bed with depression. My first two years, I just don't want to live. So, thanks to my family, they help me and said, "Your kids needs you. You can't just die in bed." So I went to see a psychiatrist, and they give me medication. —Rocio

> "My kids, I'm telling you, my kids have daddy issues real bad. Probably my son will end up in prison one day. And that really sucks." —Julio Cesar

> "When I was over there (in the U.S.), I wanted to do a lot of things, but I wasn't able to do them because I didn't have papers. And it's the same way right here with my son. He wants to do a lot of things and sometimes he's not able to do them. Even to enroll in sports, he doesn't have that option, because they ask about background." —Rodrigo

Table 3: Family Members Left Behind

	All	Men	Women	Migration Age<16	Migration Age≥16
% of Respondents with Parents, Children, Spouse/Partner, or Siblings Left in the US:					
Parents	50.8%	54%	33.3%	60.6%	8.5%
Children	29%	33.5%	5.8%	30.1%	25.6%
Spouse/ Partner	8.1%	9.4%	1.5%	8.4%	7.3%
Siblings	57%	59.5%	44.9%	64.9%	24.4%
% of Respondents with Parents, Children, Spouse/Partner, or Siblings who are US Citizens:					
Parents	15.3%	15.2%	16%	18.5%	2.4%
Children	25.8%	28%	14.8%	26.4%	24.4%
Spouse/ Partner	6.5%	7.2%	2.9%	6.6%	6.1%
Siblings	39%	42.1%	23.2%	44.9%	13.4%

E. Social Stigmatization

Returning migrants also face social ostracization. No longer forced to contend with the racial profiling and discrimination they regularly encountered as undocumented immigrants in the US, half of our respondents feel newly stigmatized upon return to the country of their birth. They describe being negatively stereotyped as criminals or gang members by strangers, neighbors and even Mexican relatives because of the way they carry themselves, the clothing they wear, and their tattoos and piercings. They are either accused of being arrogant because they lived in the US and know English or, alternatively, as criminals or failures for having returned to Mexico. Most concerning is that the discrimination extends to employment; few employers are willing to hire a repatriated migrant. As mentioned earlier, the migrants turn to call centers where their English skills are valued; 70 % of the returning migrants who left for the US as children worked in a call center for some period of time. Even though the call centers can be exploitative, for some they provide a safe haven where they can escape feeling like outcasts in the country of their birth.

> "I would go ask for a job, they say, 'No. I'm sorry. We're not looking for people like you.' … I'm like, 'What do you mean?' … 'Yes. The way you have tattoos, the way you dress. We're not looking for people like you.' … Every job I try to go get, it was like, 'No.' I was shut down." —Sylent

> "When we come back, there is a stigma with coming back. You've failed pretty much, they look at you like a failure, you fucked up, you had a dream, you had what everyone else wanted, and you got kicked out. So they look at you like they're better than you, here too. You're not Mexican either, they don't consider you Mexican." —Luisa

F. Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers further impede their ability to integrate into their Mexican families and develop a network of Mexican friends. Our interviews yielded a lengthy list of values, practices and even personality traits that returning migrants associate with their "American identity" and perceive as setting them apart from their Mexican relatives and peers. Almost every woman but also many men struggle with the *machista* culture they encounter in Mexico. Younger returnees routinely clash with protective relatives as they seek to assert the independence they enjoyed growing up in the United States. Lack of familiarity with colloquial expressions, jokes and word puns, divergent mannerisms and even tastes in food and music are frequently cited as additional impediments to forging new friendships and close familial ties in Mexico.

> "I was in a store and this guy got super crazy… He pulled out a knife and said 'you're gonna rob me, you're gonna rob me.' And I was like 'what the hell dude? I'm just trying to buy bread.'" —Jesus

> "You've got to communicate the way they do, otherwise you're like, I don't know, like, outcast… here people talk to each other with jokes and stuff all the time, …And sometimes you're left out because you don't understand what… It's like puns or something like that. They say something, but it means something else, and there's a lot of that."—Yordani

> "Latinos have that mentality that you have to get married very young and that women are just used for recreation, having a family — not for anything else because we have that type of… it's a man's world here. …So if things back home were kind of tough for women, here it's a million times worse." —Melani

> "Here in Mexico, they don't like people being direct. They don't like people being honest. They don't like people giving their opinion, especially a woman… It's like, 'No, your opinion doesn't matter.' With my attitude, it's like, 'I'm going to make my opinion matter.' So, it's completely different with people here and people in the States." —Laila

G. Depression

Sixty percent of our respondents struggle with emotional well-being. Their psychological stress both stems from and exacerbates the myriad other challenges they face upon return, notably family separation, difficulties finding employment and an overwhelming sense of cultural and social alienation. The despair is immediate and enduring, accompanied by depression, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse. Reluctant to risk adding yet another layer to the stigmatization returnees already feel and doubtful that they will be understood or even that they can communicate well enough in Spanish to express their feelings, they tend to refrain from seeking help. Even when returnees recognize the need for assistance, they either don't know where to turn for counseling or their precarious economic situation precludes them from accessing available services.

H. Resilience Against the Odds

Many migrants tell stories of eventual resilience as they overcome seemingly insurmountable roadblocks and, in fits and starts begin to carve a life for themselves in Mexico. Although still concerned about crime and insecurity in Mexico, they relish the opportunity to live without the constant fear of apprehension and deportation. These extraordinary personal success stories shed light on the enormous potential that this group holds for Mexico. Deportees who ran afoul of the law in the United States find redemption as they make a fresh start. Those who decided to return out of frustration at the dearth of educational and professional opportunities available to them in the United States complete the requisite courses, exams and paperwork enabling them to enroll at universities and find jobs that allow them to showcase their talents. There are even some who express a determination to contribute to the country of their birth through social activism or pursuit of elected office. And yet, behind every story of resilience, there are countless others of despair, failure and wasted talent that policy reform has the potential to rectify.

> "So getting here to Mexico, my goal was to destroy myself. My goal was to get mugged in the middle of the street. There will be times where I literally walked around the state of Mexico 3:00 4:00 in the morning just in the middle of the street just looking for trouble. I wanted somebody to find me. I wanted somebody to... you know all these dangerous streets that people were telling me. I wanted, I don't know I wanted to just destroy myself." —Angelo

> " I started off going to help with construction work and all of this stuff. People would tell me all the time like, "Hey, you know English, man. You know English real good. You should be doing something with that." I'd be like, "Yeah, yeah, I should." But in me, I was scared. I never walked in an office to work. If I walked in an office or something, it was just probably to deliver to some guy that was buying from me. I never, ever thought about that in my life. I'd rather face five tattoo guys in an alley before I had a conversation in the coffee room."—JC who runs training programs in call centers

> "Your freedom, you gain your freedom, to be honest. You're not afraid here. You're not afraid of anyone coming up to you and saying, "Oh, you're a wetback. Oh, you don't belong here." Because this is your country. I think, as a person, you gain calmness. You don't have to be afraid anymore," —Joana

> "My plan is, I want to have enough money so I can build houses out of plastic. Not in the center because it's already big enough. I want to build houses out of plastic in the outside parts of the city where it's really rural. And help back the community. And be able to provide houses that they are able to afford. But these are also houses that are good for the environment—to have a decent home. Because not a lot of people here have that. Supposedly the law here says that every Mexican citizen has a right to have a decent house. And now they don't follow that. So, I want to be able to provide it to the community. " —Juan

V. Policy Proposals

A. What Exists

Successive Mexican administrations have endeavored to respond to the influx of returning migrants. The Calderon administration (2006-2012) enacted a series of laws, established a Program of Human Reception (PRH) and created an accompanying Fund for Migrant Assistance all designed to provide an orderly and safe process of return. *The Migrant Support Fund*, established in 2009, is an emergency subsidy program for returning migrants and their families designed to ease employment and housing concerns, that targets 24 states with high levels of poverty, out-migration and remittance funding (Suarez et al., 2020). Administered to states according to the size of their repatriated migrant populations and persisting throughout the Pena Nieto administration, it provided migrants one-time seed grants of up to USD 1,500 to start a new business (Soto et al., 2019).

In 2013, the Pena Nieto government (2012-2018) folded existing programs into a central coordinating mechanism, *We Are Mexicans* (Somos Mexicanos), that aided repatriated Mexicans returning through the 11 officially designated reception centers straddling the Mexican border and at the Mexico City Airport. Returnees were registered in an official database, given a repatriation certificate as a form of temporary identification, and granted immediate assistance including food, hygiene kits, medical assistance, subsidized transportation back to their communities of origin and referrals to local shelters. The program also provided registered repatriated migrants with information about local and state reintegration services and allocated modest expanded federal assistance to ease integration into local labor markets within six months of their arrival. *We are Mexicans* also aimed to provide pre-departure planning through Mexican consulates in the US. Targeting eased integration into the Mexican educational system that was initially addressed, as noted earlier, in 2015, the Pena Nieto administration passed a General Law on Education in 2017 that obligated schools to enroll students irrespective of whether they possessed the requisite transcripts or academic certification. (Jacobo-Suarez and Cardenas Alaminos, 2020 and Soto et al., 2019)

In November 2020, the Lopez Obrador administration replaced We Are Mexicans with its own refurbished coordinating mechanism, known by the acronym MIFR (roughly translated as the Inter-institutional Panel on Providing Integral Support to Returning Mexican Families) and then followed up in June 2021 with the unveiling of a new, more comprehensive strategy that calls for a gender-focused and familial approach to return migration. It envisions a more elastic and expansive understanding of return addressing challenges of return encountered during three distinct phases: pre-departure planning, reception and reintegration. (Masferer and Pedroza, 2022)

B. Deficiencies

The Mexico-based reception and reintegration programs enacted by federal governments preceding the Lopez Obrador administration were almost exclusively intended to aid repatriated migrants arriving at an official reception center. Benefits were heavily weighted towards the provision of short-term reception services at welcome centers. Longer-term aid offered through the *We are Mexicans* program could only be claimed within 6 months of reentry and, in the case of the job and housing assistance program available through *The Migrant Support Fund,* aid was given exclusively to migrants returning to their marginalized communities of origin. (Jacobo- Suarez and Cardemas Alaminos, 2020).

These programs fail to address the needs of most of our survey respondents. Between 37% and 54% of our sample did not reenter Mexico through official reception centers that would have rendered them eligible. Of the 196 survey respondents who were deported and would have returned through official reentry processing, only 79 (40.3%) reported receiving any assistance upon entry. The overwhelming majority were granted only immediate assistance, notably food and transportation to their final destination, although 13% also received information about shelters. The individuals who qualified for assistance with their job search found it impossible to transfer the human capital skills acquired in the US to the marginalized communities where the subsidies could be used. Finally, the six-month window for claiming reintegration assistance was too brief. The migrants in our project described psycho-social distress that paralyzed them for several years rather than months.

Mexican Consulates have failed to serve their envisioned pre-departure assistance role. According to 2018 data compiled by the *2018 Informe de Resultados: Emif Norte* only 18% of returning migrants contacted their consulate. Of the 82% that did not, 60% did not know this was an option, while the remainder felt it would not be helpful.

Our survey reveals deficiencies in: resources allocated for reintegration; information about available programs; and the match between targeted funds and returnees' needs, skills and geographic location. Of the 196 deported survey respondents who would have reentered through an official reception center, only 79 (40.3%) reported receiving any aid. Of these, the vast majority received food and a bus ticket allowing them to continue onto their final destination. Only 13% received help finding shelter and just 3.6% (7 returnees) employment assistance.

Although it is still too early to assess the effectiveness of the Lopez Obrador government's more comprehensive MIFR strategy, our research validates its stated aim of supporting pre-departure planning and sustainable reintegration over a longer time span and across the various challenges emphasized by our respondents. At the same time, its special focus on women and families appears better suited to address the needs of migrants who are either transiting through or seeking asylum in Mexico, rather than the overwhelmingly male (84%) demographic profile of our returnee sample in which only a handful returned with partners or US-born children.

Proposals

General: As a first step, we propose that Mexico and the US should establish a binational commission to craft an expansive program of sustainable reintegration assistance that includes the initiatives listed below. Many of these can only be effective if there is a high level of cooperation and commitment by US and Mexican policy makers, government agencies and migrant advocacy organizations. Some of our proposals call for close coordination with the Mexican Consulates in the United States. Further, the levels of funding required far exceeds what Mexico is currently investing or realistically will allocate in the future. Second the policies should be expanded to serve all returning migrants, not just those who are repatriated through official reception centers and registered into the National Institute of Migration data base. Third, the bulk of assistance should be invested in long term reintegration initiatives which, while more expensive than current welcome assistance, will have longer lasting impacts.

Specific: Below is a set of suggested policy proposals that reflect the reintegration struggles the migrants we interviewed faced. They are divided into categories according to the challenge addressed.

ID Acquisition

Launch a campaign to guide prospective returnees and repatriated migrants, as well as migrant advocacy organizations in the US and Mexico, through the bureaucratic process of obtaining documents required for establishing an ID and gaining employment in the private or public sector.

Education

Undertake a national media and outreach campaign in the US, in conjunction with Mexican consulates, designed to inform Mexican Americans, immigrant advocacy organizations, and school districts about the documentation repatriated migrants will need to resume their education upon return to Mexico.

Provide an accelerated course of study, offered both on-line and in person, to "upgrade" an American diploma to Mexican standards designed specifically for repatriated migrants.

Job Placement Policies

Develop a searchable, on-line database of skills and work experience of returning migrants.

Establish centralized employment resource centers which are designed specifically for returning migrants and provide services to promote entry into productive work.

Social Integration

Create a comprehensive Spanish language learning program for returning migrants, similar to American public education ESL systems, to refresh or re-learn their language skills.

Establish widespread and affordable mental health programs/clinics to deal with the specific depression and anxiety issues that plague many repatriated migrants.

Launch a media campaign designed to confront the biases and stereotypes that foster discrimination towards returning migrants.

Family Separation

Facilitate and fast track US passport and Mexican citizenship applications for the US- born children of repatriated migrants

Provide temporary reunification mechanisms such as short-term visas or sanctioned visits.

VI. Conclusion

Currently roughly 70,000-80,000 deportees and individuals obtaining voluntary departure return to Mexico each year, a number that excludes those who leave the US voluntarily which, according to our survey sample, adds another 50%. These numbers are not small, and the policies designed to ease reintegration will be costly. But these costs are dwarfed by the potential rewards. By reducing barriers to the bureaucratic, cultural, economic, psychological, and social barriers to sustainable integration, Mexico can harness the human and social capital skills of returning migrants, the US can experience a decrease in attempted re-migration as well as stronger, better-adjusted binational families, and returning migrants can substitute the confusion and the despair they face upon repatriation with newfound opportunities for personal and professional growth in the country of their birth.

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Endnotes

1 See Pew Research Center report on Net Migration between Mexico and the US, July 8, 2921. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/09/before-covid-19-more-mexicans-came-to-the-u-s-than-left-for-mexico-for-the-first-time-in-years/

2 The *2018 Yearbook of Migration and Remittances, Mexico* (Arenillas et.al., 2018) documents that the full set of migrants returning to Mexico in 2017 was even more predominantly male (91%), but the gender discrepancy had been growing over the preceding 10 years. The median age of the returning men and women was slightly higher than in our sample (25-29 age range) but, as we observe, women were on average a bit younger than men.

3 According to the 2018 yearbook, 38% of the repatriated Mexicans in 2017, compared to 97% in our sample, had lived in the US for more than a year. However, the yearbook estimates are likely to include a lot of repeat migrants and migrants who never stray far from the border; new PEW estimates (Passel et.al., 2019) reveal that a majority (66%) of adult undocumented Mexicans have lived in the US for 10 years or longer.

4 These numbers are calculated for the 2019 respondents, where the majority of forced expulsions (71%) were imposed on migrants who were picked up for a traffic violation, a misdemeanor, or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time We did not ask about why the migrant was picked up by ICE in the 2018 survey, but we imagine the patterns are similar since the 2019 and 2018 respondents look alike on almost every dimension. Of the 23 individuals picked up for more serious crimes, only 2 committed violent crimes and the rest committed felonies which usually translated into selling drugs.

5 A testimony to our respondents' fluency is that more than 97% of our in-depth interviews were conducted in English, often by individuals with no Spanish language skills.

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