

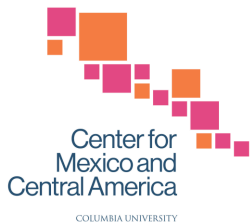
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*Vulnerabilities of
Deportation to Northern
Mexico Associated With
Long-time U.S. Residence,
Heroin Use, or Gang
Identities*

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Keywords: deportation, gangs, heroin, violence, vulnerability, Mexico

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

English	Spanish	
	CURP	Clave Única de Registro de Población Unique Population Registry Code
DHS		United States Department of Homeland Security Departamento de Seguridad Nacional de los Estados Unidos
ICE		Immigration and Customs Enforcement Control de Inmigración y Aduanas
IIRIRA		Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 Ley de Reforma de Inmigración Ilegal y Responsabilidad de los Inmigrantes de 1996
	INE	Instituto Nacional Electoral National Electoral Institute
	INFONAVIT	Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores Institute of the National Workers' Housing Fund
LPR		Lawful Permanent Resident Residente Permanente

1. INTRODUCTION

This report examines vulnerabilities of deportation from the United States to northern Mexico through two lenses: 1) broadly, that of deportation for all people and, 2) more narrowly, that of long-time U.S. residents, heroin users, and gang-identified people.¹ The report aims to elucidate the hardships of life after deportation as well as suggest the limited means people have to attenuate them by drawing on social, economic, and cultural resources. Moreover, it gives special attention to specific classes of people—long-time U.S. residents, heroin users, and gang-identified people—who face compounding vulnerabilities in the United States and in northern Mexico.

Of more than 58 million U.S. government deportations, and counting, to places around the world since 1892,² the majority have been to northern Mexico. The geographic, economic, political, and social landscapes of northern Mexico reflected in the contents of this report are distinct from those of other countries, as well as of Mexican interior receiving communities, such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, and others. Nevertheless, the area surrounding 1,954 miles of U.S.-Mexico border contains tremendous diversity. The northern Mexican region comprises deportee receiving communities as varied as the template, hilly, Pacific-coast urban center of Tijuana, the most-visited border city in the world; the arid desert metroplex of the largest Mexican border city, Ciudad Juárez; the semi-arid Gulf-adjacent city of Nuevo Laredo, the site of highest cross-border trade by volume in Latin America; the flat, sandy San Luis Río Colorado, of less than 200,000 inhabitants; and the nine other border cities and towns that received deported people in 2022. This report describes generally the conditions of these northern Mexican receiving communities and recognizes the structural dynamics shared among them. More granular examinations of hyperlocal conditions and individual histories are beyond the scope of this report.

2. METHODS

This report draws on ethnographic fieldwork on deportation and drug trafficking in northern Mexico. Over 26 non-consecutive months since 2011, I have conducted unstructured and in-depth, semi-structured interviews and carried out street ethnography³ in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Nogales, Sonora; and Puerto Peñasco, Sonora. This form of long-term ethnographic engagement leverages the researcher's experiences, observations, and interactions of various aspects of local community life in order to theorize social phenomena. Moreover, it combines formal research design elements—systematically observing relevant places and institutions and interviewing key people—with a spontaneous, improvisational approach to uncovering critical aspects of everyday life by being present and seeking interactions with others. This commitment

to place over time, moreover, permits triangulation, or circling back—a way of testing emerging understandings by contrasting information from various sources, such as community members, institutional representatives, media, and scholarly publications.

While carrying out ethnographic research since 2011, I have interviewed hundreds of people migrating or who have been deported or are seeking asylum, U.S. and Mexican government officials, deportees' family members, humanitarian aid workers, activists, and community members, as well as illicit drug consumers and lookouts, runners, and low-and mid-level dealers and smugglers involved in the illicit drug business. To gain additional perspective on removal processes, I also volunteered as a legal advocate in immigration detention facilities in Florence and Eloy, Arizona. Moreover, my research draws on social scientific scholarship of migration, deportation, borders, drug use and abuse, and precarity and violence.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEPORTATION

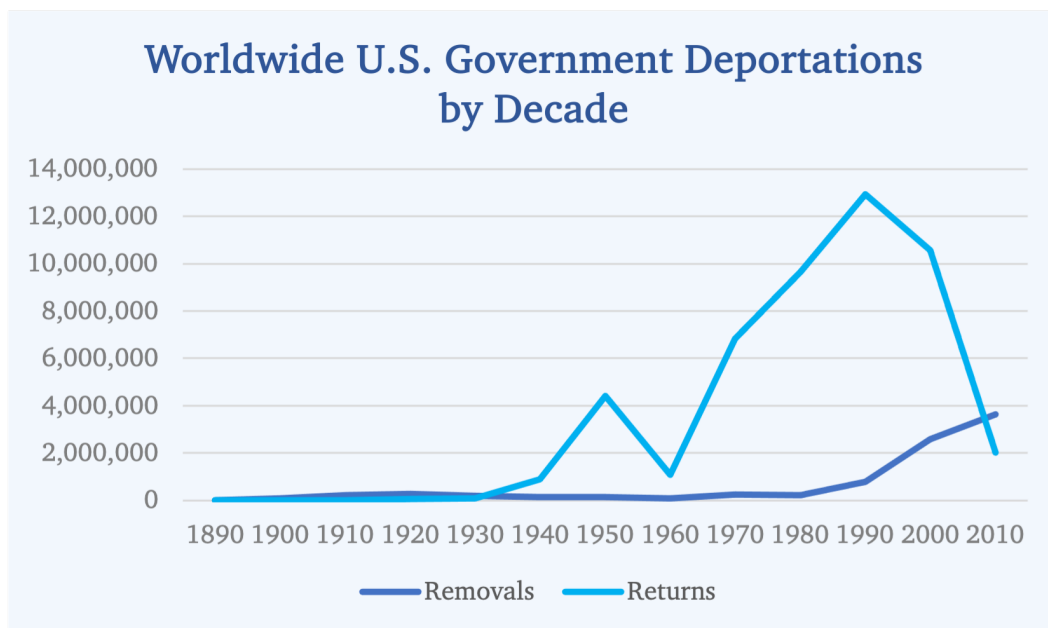
Today, U.S. government deportations are seen as a normal exercise of national sovereignty, but this has not always been the case. It was not until the late 19th century that the federal government had a statutory basis for excluding and expelling first Chinese nationals and then immigrants generally, under the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Geary Act of 1892, and the Immigration Act of 1917. Since the 1980s, reconfigured statutory frameworks have linked immigration and crime control. Simultaneously, increased funding and personnel have expanded the U.S. federal government's deportation apparatus.⁴

U.S. government deportations have historically taken two main forms and, since 2020, a third.⁵ First, so-called removal is based on an order granted by a judge or deportation officer. Removals carry bans to later reentry of five- to twenty-years or life. Expedited removals, imposed by IIRIRA, are a subset of removals to which normal removal proceedings, such as a trial before an immigration judge, do not take place. Expedited removal applies to certain noncitizens based on the region of arrest within the territorial United States, the country of origin of the arrested person, and the time since entering the country. Reinstatement of removal applies to noncitizens previously deported. Stipulated removal is a deportation mechanism whereby people waive their right to contest charges of removability in a hearing before an immigration judge. All removal types engender criminal consequences, often 30 days or more of prison time, for persons who are apprehended after a removal and subsequent reentry into the United States. A second process is “return,” an administrative expulsion that carries fewer consequences—it does not impede ensuing visa applications or attempts to later gain legal entry. Since the 1990s there has been a shift in effectuating high numbers of returns to high numbers of removals. In 2020, the government began counting a third

category, expulsions, or “encounters resulting in expulsions on public health grounds... in response to the COVID-19 pandemic”⁶, when the Trump administration summarily expelled noncitizens under the public health authority of section 265 of Title 42 of the United States Code.

The streamlining of U.S. government expulsion processes is reflected in annual removal and return statistics. Until the Immigration and Nationality Act took effect in 1965, annual deportations from the United States numbered in the thousands or tens of thousands. Returns numbered in the hundreds of thousands each year beginning in the mid-1960s, and the millions in the 1990s, peaking in the year 2000 at 1,675,876.⁷ Annual returns fell in the early 2000s and did not exceed 200,000 in any year between 2013 and 2021.⁸ Annual removals numbered in the thousands or tens of thousands for much of the 20th century, increasing exponentially in the 1990s, reaching hundreds of thousands in 1997, and peaking at 415,700 in 2012.⁹

Figure 1: *Worldwide U.S. Government Deportations by Decade*¹⁰



Today, the U.S. and Mexican federal governments coordinate deportations to designated ports-of-entry. Of all deportations from the U.S. to Mexico, 94% of are to northern Mexico border communities, while the rest are to Mexico City, Guadalajara, and a few other cities in Mexico’s interior. While the large metropolitan border area of Tijuana received 94,183 people in 2022,¹¹ tens of thousands of people are deported to other large metroplexes, such as Ciudad Juárez, as well as mid-sized cities of more than a hundred thousand but fewer than a million inhabitants. In 2022, 24,450 people were deported to Mexicali and 34,175 to Nogales.¹² These large populations of newly

deported people in northern Mexico must make critical yet agonizing decisions about their future and to mitigate hardships surrounding family separation, housing, work, mental and physical health and wellbeing, and avoiding violent victimization. Some people attempt clandestine northward crossings, move to other border towns, or travel south. Others stay.¹³

Figure 2: U.S. Government Removals and Returns to Mexico, 2012-2021¹⁴



Figure 3: Map of Repatriations from United States to Mexico¹⁵

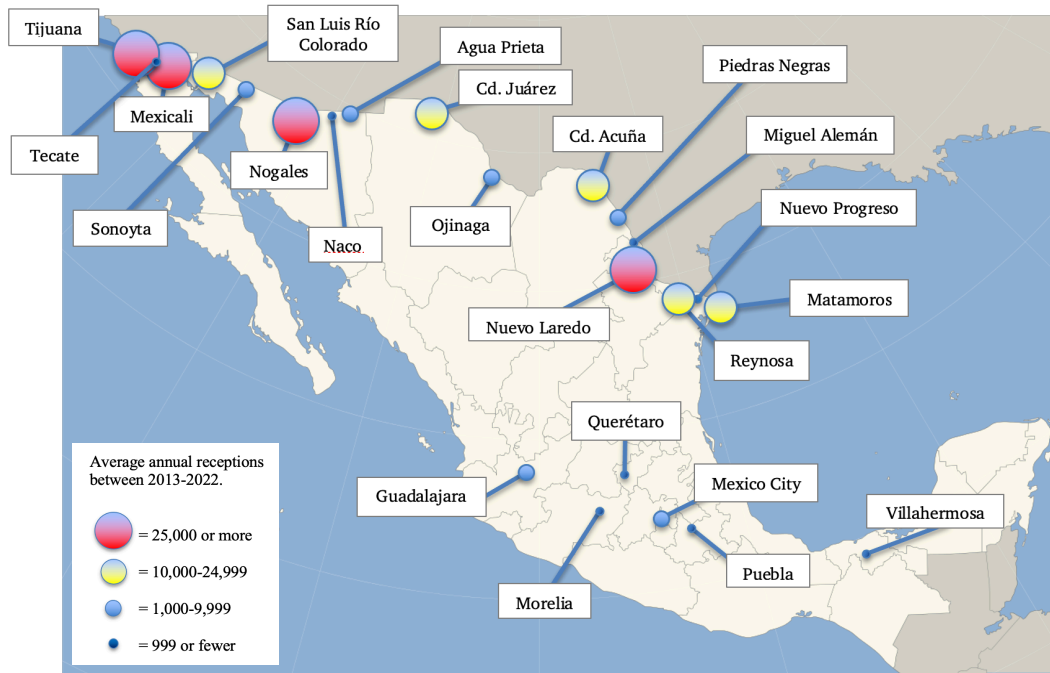


Table 1: Last Decade and Recent Year Repatriations to Mexico, By City¹⁶

City	Total Repatriations, 2013-2022	Repatriations, 2022
Tijuana, Baja California	390,525	93,183
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas	301,879	16,225
Mexicali, Baja California	253,555	24,450
Nogales, Sonora	251,821	34,175
Cd. Acuña, Coahuila	212,005	17,057
Matamoros, Tamaulipas	154,484	9,586
Reynosa, Tamaulipas	142,605	20,141
San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora	141,943	22,385
Cd. Juárez, Chihuahua	109,766	6,390
*Ciudad de México	87,536	681
Piedras Negras, Coahuila	55,773	4,349
Agua Prieta, Sonora	22,332	70
Ojinaga, Chihuahua	17,051	5,558
*Guadalajara, Jalisco	15,075	1,070
Sonoyta, Sonora	12,763	1,686
*Villahermosa, Tabasco	6,688	0
*Querétaro, Querétaro	4,698	0
*Morelia, Michoacán	4,659	0
*Puebla, Puebla	2,844	1
Tecate, Baja California	240	0
Naco, Sonora	111	0
Nuevo Progreso, Tamaulipas	74	0
Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas	6	0

* Non-border city

4. VULNERABILITIES AND HARDSHIPS FOR ALL DEPORTEES AND LONG-TIME U.S. RESIDENTS

The rise of U.S. government mass deportations have made their effects visible globally, including in Afghanistan¹⁷, Cape Verde¹⁸, the Dominican Republic¹⁹, El Salvador²⁰, Guatemala²¹, Honduras²², Jamaica²³, central Mexico²⁴, Somalia²⁵, as well as in northern Mexico where I and others have conducted empirical research.²⁶ Ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted with deported people in northern Mexico between 2013 and 2023 revealed that deportation practices may engender vulnerabilities and hardships akin to those of other forced displacements, such as social isolation, psychological trauma, health degradation, and economic hardship.

The vulnerabilities of deportation are compounded for long-time U.S. residents. Those who have spent decades in the United States, in some cases without ever visiting their countries of legal citizenship, deportation often results in particular disorientation. For these people, social ties and cultural orientations have been configured around experiences in U.S. communities, at a physical and temporal remove from everyday life in their countries of first citizenship, as well as from the legal and political systems that they face upon return. A subset of long-time U.S. residents with whom I have conducted research in northern Mexico are those who migrated to the United States at a young age (age 12 or younger, in the case of my research)²⁷ and have known no other home than the United States. Legal historian Daniel Kanstroom has called this population, in global context, the “new American diaspora.”²⁸ This population has grown in northern Mexico, particularly since relief from deportation for long-time residents was curtailed by IIRIRA in 1996 and deportations increased overall in the 2000s and early 2010s.

In recent decades, the U.S. government’s refusal to regularize unauthorized immigrants from Mexico (among other places) coupled with increased border militarization has incentivized longer periods of settlement in the United States by people who previously may have chosen to return to Mexico seasonally. Whereas access to legal residency would permit coming and going between the United States and Mexico, about five million undocumented Mexican nationals (approximately half of the United States’ undocumented population)²⁹ must choose confinement to the United States or a departure that’s most likely permanent. Long-time U.S. residence is reflected in various statistics. One survey of people born in Mexico and deported between 2009 and 2012 suggested that they had lived in the United States for an average of 8.8 years.³⁰ Data of deported Mexican nationals compiled in 2018 demonstrated that 82% had lived in the United States for more than three years and 42% for more than 10 years.³¹ Even more noteworthy is that of all Mexican nationals living in the United States in 2013, 77% had lived there for at least 10 years, whereas in 1990 that figure was 50%.³²

Social isolation

Deportation results in separation and isolation from friends, family, and community. For those living in the United States before deportation, as many interlocutors have explained to me, deportation may constitute a particularly sudden or unexpected removal, given the complexities of deportation law and removal procedures. Their experience of deportation is one of “profound disjuncture, one that catapults the protagonist into another reality in which he or she must become, in certain respects, someone else.”³³ The shock of forcible removal is felt more acutely without the companionship and support of loved ones. Moreover, attempts to adapt to new circumstances are made more difficult by the isolation that deported people may feel.³⁴ Moreover, given the difficulties of maintaining intimacy across physical distance, over time many deported people lose all contact with children, siblings, parents, or other loved ones.

In some cases, family members choose to relocate to Mexico to live with deported loved ones,³⁵ rearranging employment, education, health care, and living situations as well as personal aspirations and ways of life. Many people deported after living in the United States belong to mixed-status families wherein family members may have a mix of Mexican or U.S. citizenship and be in the United States without authorization or as Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs).³⁶ For U.S. citizen family members who relocate to Mexico as a de facto deportation, to be with deported family members³⁷, they may surrender some privileges of U.S. citizenship and also face the difficulties of and resentment for their own uprootedness.

Family separation wrought by deportation may have profound legal effects as well. U.S. citizen minor children in some cases become wards of state child services agencies pending family court custody cases.³⁸ The inability of deported people to prepare for and take part in a trial or judicial procedures related to their own families can lead to the severing of parental rights or other serious and permanent consequences.

Psychosocial hardship

The toll of deportation on mental health and wellbeing is reflected in individuals, families, and communities.³⁹ The compounding vulnerabilities that deported people face manifest in a sense of loss, depression, stress, panic disorders, and generalized anxiety. Deportation catalyzes social, emotional, and financial changes for family members in Mexico or the United States. Emotional connection and attachment become frayed by separation and feelings of loss, abandonment, and resentment. Children who lose a parent to deportation face behavioral changes relating to eating, sleeping, emotional regulation, academic performance, and housing and food insecurity and manifest feelings of anger, aggression, fear, or withdrawal.⁴⁰ Older children may be expected to take on work, or additional work, to supplement family income when a parent is deported.

Family effects of deportation are multi-generational and extend to many family members. Grandparent-headed households also face profound change when noncitizen

grandparents are deported and family stability and supports children and others receive are upended. In some cases where grandparents are primary caregivers or co-parenting, the deportation of grandparents results in foster care placement for children.⁴¹

Lack of documentation

People are deported with whatever few belongings are in their possession, which often do not include official government identification documents, at the time of their detention by ICE officials. Once people are led from DHS-contracted buses or 15-passenger vans at U.S.-Mexico ports of entry, shackles and handcuffs removed, plastic bags emblazoned with DHS logos carrying belongings are signed for and returned, if people's belongings were not lost.⁴² There may be no identity documents included at all among deported people's belongings.

Identity and proof-of-citizenship documents are needed for housing, health care access, employment, and other basic activities in Mexico. The importance of such documents is often taken for granted given most people's access to them most of the time. Yet delays in receiving or accessing services or denials of opportunities to live, get medical care, or work compound other difficulties of deportation. Other aspects of life are affected as well, including low-level extortion by police. Municipal codes may require carrying government-issued identification, under the penalty of a minor civil infraction. In practice, these municipal codes render vulnerable to police extortion certain stigmatized subsets of the population, such as those who are deportee outsiders. Migrants, asylum seekers, deported people, and repatriation officials have told me that civil infractions for failure to carry identification are rare; more common from my observations and interviews are police demands for small amounts of money to avoid an arrest or fine. Deported people not familiar with identification-related laws or local police practices are particularly vulnerable to this kind of extortion, finding themselves confronted by uniformed patrol officers persuasively asserting their police authority.

Understanding types of documentation needed, and obtaining those documents, turns on cultural knowledge as well. For long-time U.S. residents, it can be a surprise to learn that driver licenses and identity cards issued by U.S. states' departments of motor vehicles—the most ubiquitous identity document in the United States—are often not valid identification in Mexico. To apply for and receive the standard identification document in Mexico, the *Credencial para Votar* (Voter's Card), referred to colloquially as an "INE" because it is issued by the Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE), one needs a series of other documents. For example, proof of residential address is difficult to obtain for recently deported people. Moreover, birth certificates can be hard to recover after deportation or to get reissued by a vital records division of one of Mexico's states who issued the original, often decades earlier. Original Mexican birth certificates, in the case of long-time U.S. residents, may be in the possession of U.S.-resident family members and be difficult to send or take to Mexico. In recent years, the digitization of vital records and access via internet and kiosks has improved this situation. Nevertheless,

the barriers that persist, to pay the small fees charged at kiosks or to gain computer and printer access, result in some deported people never attaining a birth certificate and, thus, not having the necessary documents to apply for an INE.

Health degradation

Health care access is complicated by factors mentioned above: 1) not having government-issued identification documents and 2) a lack of familiarity with urban spaces and the cultural milieu of health care institutions. Identification documents not only prove identity, but also Mexican citizenship, which determines eligibility for universal governmental health insurance and other programs. Moreover, not knowing where to go—among the complex web of public and private hospitals, clinics, practitioners' offices, and pharmacies, which often provide low-cost consults—in a given city and, in many cases, how to navigate the bureaucratic and opaque cultures and regulations once there. Financial hardship and itinerant living also complications to receiving quality, ongoing preventative and palliative health care include.

Financial instability means that for many, low- or no-cost federal government health insurance programs are the only option, if they can be located and accessed. The privatized system that exists in parallel, offering broader coverage and higher quality primary care, is simply too costly, or otherwise inaccessible since formal and gig economy employment as well as many formal jobs do not avail workers of access to private health care. Recently deported people are offered health services at Módulos de Atención Integral de la Salud (Holistic Health Care Modules) located at border crossings that may offer medical consults, care, referrals, and registration in the Mexican federal government's Seguro Popular (Universal Health Insurance) program.

Economic Hardship

Low wages, document and age discrimination, a tight labor market, and gendered familial expectations of financial provision all contribute to economic hardship for many deported people. For people who have worked in various U.S. industries, wages in Mexico—even in northern Mexico, where wages in many labor sectors are the highest in the country—are stark by contrast. For formally contracted work, the U.S. government's federal hourly minimum wage is US\$7.25, although it is higher in many states. In Mexico, by contrast, as of 2023 the daily minimum wage on the northern border, where it is higher than elsewhere in Mexico, is MX\$312.41⁴³, or a little more than US\$18 a day.

Job and housing prospects for deported people are often limited. Teaching English and working in bilingual call centers are two obvious places of employment for deported people. Even the most respected English institutes and call centers in Mexico do not pay particularly well and require long or difficult working hours of employees.⁴⁴ Moreover, many long-time U.S. residents do not have the linguistic competency in Spanish for the English-Spanish interpretation of some call center work or, due to the stigma of

being deported, may be passed over for hire.⁴⁵ Although deported people may gain employment in manufacturing, security, and other formal sector jobs, many often labor in the informal and gig economies in tourism or other sectors.

Border tourist areas provide opportunities to secure an income by leveraging cultural capital and English skills among visitors from the United States. Border cities such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Nogales, and others have entrenched histories as tourist destinations from the United States.⁴⁶ For example, one effect of prohibition on the sale of alcohol by constitutional amendment in the United States between 1919 and 1933 is the exportation of alcohol consumption to northern Mexico.⁴⁷ Subsequently, vice has formed one part of border economies in the form of sex-, gambling-, and drug-tourism by U.S. citizens and LPRs in Mexico. Moreover, expensive prescription drug prices in the United States have produced a pharmaceutical tourism industry as well. Deported people are well-positioned to draw on cultural and linguistic capital to engage in tourism work. Nevertheless, wages and tips are usually meager and, without incorporation into the formal labor economy, benefits nonexistent.

5. SOCIAL IDENTITIES: THE VISIBILITY OF DEPORTATION AND LONG-TIME U.S. RESIDENCE

Beyond the structural impacts of deportation after long-time U.S. residence, interpersonal discrimination results from the visibility of U.S.-influenced social identities. Social identities are embodied expressions of personhood that are visible to community members and which, in the case of deported people, may compound vulnerabilities to interpersonal discrimination in northern Mexico. For scholars in the humanities and social sciences, the notion of social identities is useful for referring to aspects of personhood that are meaningful and, although often subtle, broadly recognizable. Social identities are distinct from what could be called personal identities, personhood, or the self, which comprise vast complexity and variability. Moreover, they permit more nuance than the broad demographic categories of, for example, race, gender, and social class.⁴⁸ Social identities emerge in local contexts, in certain places and times, as ways of being that people learn from those around them and that constantly change. Long-term community engagement, a research method called ethnography which anthropologists and other social scientists employ, enables recognition and understanding of the expressions associated with certain social identities and their meanings.

Long-term U.S. residence is made visible through physical appearance and speech and is further reflected in cultural knowledge. Bodily presentations that comprise modes of dress, hairstyles, jewelry, and tattoos draw from the cultural repertoires within communities in their “social remittances.”⁴⁹ As deported people navigate self-expressions across space, time, and life histories associated with the United States, their identities may render them visible and recognizable—crucial to the construction

of vulnerability.⁵⁰

Speech patterns—including lexical repertoire (active and passive vocabulary) and phonological variation (accent)—also reveal long-time U.S. residence. Again, transnational circulations of people, popular culture (e.g., music and television shows), and governmental or commercial communications, among others, result in constant migrations of speech patterns, such that there is never a way of speaking Spanish, English, or any other language that reveals a “U.S.” or “Mexican” identity. Nevertheless, lexical and phonological features may be associated with certain communities and lead to assumptions of particular social identities. In the case of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and beyond, while both English and Spanish are both prominent, the expectations and assumptions of language use in particular contexts are shaped in part by language ideologies that conflate U.S. identity with English-language use and Mexican identity with Spanish.

Longtime U.S. residents deported to Mexico face stigma and rejection⁵¹ and are called “*pochos*,” “*cholos*,” “*maleantes*,” and other negative descriptors whose existence and intelligibility reflect the cultural salience of the groups themselves. “*Pocho*” is a disparaging term referring to an “inauthentic Mexican,” someone identified with Mexican heritage who speaks stigmatized forms of Spanish and is seen as lacking in local cultural knowledge. The designator “*cholo*” indicates someone identified with urban street culture or gang cultural markers, and may be attributed to people with tattoos, shaved heads, or other cultural forms of U.S. identity. “*Maleante*” and the variations “*malandro*” and “*mandrín*” embed meanings along the lines of troublemaker, thug, and punk. These designators reflect the stigma associated with deported people. In some cases, the demarcation of deported people as cultural and linguistic “other” takes racial overtones, as in the infrequent use of terms, jokingly or in earnest, such as “*gabacho*”⁵², “*gringo*,” and “*güero*,” which are normally reserved for white, U.S.-identified people. While race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, ability, religion, and class constitute certain well-known categories of social identity, other social identities—such as “*tecató*” or “*jaipo*” (heroin user), “*pandillero*” (gang member), and “*cholo*” may become crucial to people’s experiences of social life.

6. COMPOUNDING VULNERABILITIES: HEROIN USE

Social identities associated with heroin use, which have particular salience in certain contexts, compound the vulnerabilities of deportation, especially for long-term U.S. residents. In 2016-2017, past-year heroin consumption in Mexico was below 0.1 percent for people aged 12-65, although prevalence of illicit drug use in northern Mexico is above the national mean.⁵³ Long-time U.S. residents who are deported and transition between U.S. communities, U.S. carceral environments, and northern Mexico, encounter destabilization of physical, emotional, and social supports and other

deportation-related stressors which shape the behavioral and contextual factors that affect drug use trajectories.⁵⁴

In addition, treatment options are inadequate. Government-run programs have been closed in recent years and, moreover, private for-profit drug rehabilitation centers, called *centros de rehabilitación* wherein people are subjected to *anexos*, or periods of institutional confinement, are both abusive and ineffectual. Physical abuse in *centros*, documented by anthropologist Angela García in the context of Mexico City, has been described by my interlocutors as a means of disciplining residents and maintaining order.⁵⁵ I visited four *centros* in Nogales, on more than a dozen occasions. Failure to adequately perform duties—sweeping, mopping, washing or folding clothing or bedding, cooking, scrubbing dishes, among other tasks—could result in admonitions of laziness, the withholding of food or other basic necessities, and some form of physical punishment. In one *centro* in Nogales, two English-speaking deported people who had been interned there called the employees who enforced discipline for the *centro*'s director, themselves former residents, the “goon squad.”

Mexico's federal government has set guidelines for public health interventions and a harm-reduction approach to drug use,⁵⁶ yet accountability mechanisms and budgetary allocations do not exist to actually implement programs. In practice, not only has the government persisted in a punitive, law-enforcement approach to drug use,⁵⁷ but it has closed several of the country's few methadone clinics in recent years reflects. Mexico City's clinic was shuttered in 2018, as were clinics in Cd. Juárez and Mexicali in 2019, and in Hermosillo, the capital of the state of Sonora, in 2015.⁵⁸ Also in 2015, a methadone facility in Nogales received treatment was suddenly closed without explanation—there is no longer a clinic in the state.

Anexos or *centros de rehabilitación* are often the only residential “treatment” option for deported people and others to self-commit or be forcibly committed by others and are known for forced confinement and violence. Angela García described them as “hybrid institution[s] composed of parts 12-step program, mental asylum, prison, and church.”⁵⁹ Medical personnel and medication for withdrawal are absent and people are left without access to medication and proper treatment. People are detained against their will and solitary confinement, withholding of meals, beatings, and bodily restraints are deployed as forms of coercive control. Residential *encargados* (dorm supervisors)—residents with months or years without relapse—are often the only personnel staffing. Under threat of violence, *encargados* ensure that residents followed rigid schedules, participating in collective daily activities in cramped quarters, including sleeping, cooking, eating, praying, and spending long, tiresome hours in *juntas*, or 12-step meetings). The only opportunity to leave the facility may be the “privilege” of working for no pay, in jobs such as cleaning supermarkets.

Drug use in Mexico, and heroin use in particular, exposes users to particular vulnerabilities within the political economy of violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Drug cartels have at times coordinated “social” campaigns in regions where they

operate.⁶⁰ Cartel propaganda, disseminated for example through handmade signs hung in public places, touts pro-employment, anti-violence, or anti-drug use messaging as putative public health and public safety “programs.”⁶¹

Not only are health care services often difficult to access in northern Mexico, as indicated above, but opioid-related care is particularly problematic. Significant barriers to long-term clinical, therapeutic, or pharmacotherapeutic engagement⁶² and treatment exist.⁶³ The struggles are compounded for formerly incarcerated individuals, such as long-time U.S. residents who were incarcerated as heroin users. Relapse rates for those who undergo detoxification in carceral settings can be as high as 75% within three months of release.⁶⁴ Removal from the United States and the concomitant lack of access to effective treatment may produce an analogous circumstance. Even after immediate withdrawal, desistance from opioid consumption is arduous,⁶⁵ leading some to resort to consuming street drugs which, as mentioned in the paragraph above, may be a particularly dangerous.

7. COMPOUNDING VULNERABILITIES: GANG IDENTITIES

In the United States, street gangs and prison gangs have provided social belonging and oppositional cultural spaces for youth marginalized by mainstream institutions⁶⁶ and whose nonnormative styles and behaviors become criminalized, deemed deviant and treated punitively.⁶⁷ Processes of criminalization stymie social and economic opportunities yet also promote collective social identities, such as street gang identities.⁶⁸ While outsider definitions of “gang” and “gang member” are slippery and gang members’ identities are contested and shifting, people do refer to themselves as belonging to “organizations,” “crews,” “sets,” and other terms.⁶⁹ Prison gangs (also known as a “*ranfla/car*” or a “*clica/cliقة*”), moreover, are borne of group solidarity and configured in carceral settings when the prison administrators rely on the categorization and separation of incarcerated individuals according to their presumed racial identities, regional origins, and gang affiliations.⁷⁰ This contributes to a rigid “carceral social order” of in-group and out-group affiliations that governs everyday life in punitive institutions and shapes incarcerated people’s self- and group-identities.⁷¹ In fiscal year 2018, ICE identified 5,872, or just over two percent of deported people, as “suspected or confirmed gang members.”⁷²

After deportation, embodied gang member identifications persist even as people are displaced from one social context to another. In northern Mexico, the signifiers of shaved heads, baggy clothing, *placas*, and “street” English or Spanish mark gang members as *pandilleros* or *cholos*. Gang members tend to form relationships after deportation around shared cultural identities—with this author, interviewees have emphasized the importance of solidarity with “people like you,” “people that have lived what you live,”

or “people you can trust”—and circulate emotional solidarity and material support. Paradoxically, the visibility of gang identities that intensify vulnerability may be increased by the group associations that people create with other gang affiliated people.

8. STRUCTURED VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN MEXICO

Several cities and towns in northern Mexico which receive Mexican deportees present unique safety risks. Northern Mexican border regions have undergone unpredictable regional spikes in violence, particularly since 2006.⁷³ The six states comprising northern Mexico—Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas—have been among the most affected by violence after 2008 and continue to experience alarming levels shifting, regionally concentrated violence.⁷⁴ Northern Mexico cities constitute the principle U.S.-Mexico transnational nodes of licit commerce and the clandestine or illicit crossing of migrants, drugs, cash, and guns, controlled by the organized crime groups.⁷⁵ The political economy of violence in northern Mexico reveals the entanglements of the U.S. government’s restrictionist immigration and drug policy, U.S.-Mexico border militarization, high poverty in Mexico, the Mexican government’s frontal “war” on drug cartels, and inter-cartel fighting.⁷⁶ Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, and Nogales⁷⁷ have for decades been influenced by organized crime groups that collude with different factions of the Mexican and U.S. governments and assert control through threats and targeted torture and killing.⁷⁸

Figure 4: *Map of Mexican Borderlands*



Cartel control has tightened as northern Mexican cities have transitioned from being merely a transit point to an important dealing and consumption site as well. *Narcomenudeo* (retail drug sales) and drug consumption in Mexico's north has risen generally.⁷⁹ Permanent *tiraderos* (retail drug sales points) are supplied by cartel bosses and transporters. *Tiraderos* are protected by colluding municipal police, paid puntos (lookouts) with two-way radios, and heavily armed sicarios (cartel enforcers/hitmen) and frequented by consumers seeking rock or powder cocaine, methamphetamines, marijuana, and black-tar heroin.⁸⁰ *Tiraderos*, although illicit, are protected by the municipal police and operate in plain sight, only threatened by the Mexican military's highly infrequent raids.

The high public visibility of cartel brutality in various regions of Mexico creates particular fear for deported long-time U.S. residents. Drug cartels have utilized creative forms of symbolic hyper-violence dubbed “narco-propaganda”: threatening banners in town squares; corpses hung from bridges; dead bodies heaped in public places; and bodies burned, shocked, stabbed, dismembered, and otherwise mutilated.⁸¹ Such “theatrical and ceremonial violence”—disseminated widely through social media, blogs, YouTube, traditional media, and word of mouth—is calculated to instill fear in and claim dominance over rival cartels, the government, and the public at large.⁸²

Beyond tyrannical messaging, organized crime groups assert the authority to control and police retail drug sales and mete out warnings, torture, violence, and death as punishment for transgressing strictures. In Nogales for example, soldiers and Federal Police—and since 2021 the National Guard—are putatively responsible for drug interdiction, have only twice in recent years conducted high-profile raids of *tiraderos*. Soldiers, police, and the National Guard opt to restrict their activities to extorting individuals for possession away from *tiradero* sites and occasional interdiction of drug shipments outside of the city. Sicarios are the cartel's enforcement agents and are charged with carrying out the orders of the management. When engaging in enforcement activities, sicarios unambiguously communicate the local rules, as determined by the bosses, and the punishment for breaking them, linking the cartel itself, and not rogue actors, directly to the harm that befalls heroin users.

9. RELOCATION FROM NORTHERN MEXICO

Despite the significant and unique vulnerabilities of northern Mexico, relocating to other regions of a country is often not an option. Deported long-time U.S. residents remain in the northern Mexican border region in attempts to stay close to family, utilize English-language and U.S. cultural knowledge, or avoid violent victimization at the hands of organized crime, which may be an even greater risk elsewhere. These factors in combination may animate the desire to stay. In northern Mexico, deported people may receive visits and emotional and material support from U.S. citizen or LPR children,

siblings, or parents in the U.S. southwest, just hours or less down the freeway from places in and around Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, Tucson, El Paso, and other cities. Moreover, if family members with U.S. citizen or LPR status relocate to Mexico, they have more physical proximity to the United States and U.S. social or other resources in northern Mexico.

In addition, northern Mexico labor economies rely on a supply of labor with familiarity with U.S. cultures and English-language competency. As noted above, work in English-Spanish call centers and in day and overnight tourism are options for deported people in northern Mexico. These work options are often more prevalent or more visible in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands than in other areas of Mexico where they also exist, such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, or coastal tourist destinations.

Lastly, leaving northern Mexico may increase the risk of violent victimization. This jeopardy may be two-fold: 1) the organized crime groups' expansive networks, which extend into all 32 Mexican states, and 2) animus in other regions toward stigmatized outsiders. A person who becomes a target in northern Mexico may continue to be at risk throughout Mexico because organized crime groups often have the operational capability—via inter-regional communication and collusion with police and military actors—of carrying out violence throughout the country. Acting on existing vendettas by consummating violence in other regions is symbolically important to violent groups' authority and coercive population control. At the same time, individuals' association with a particular region—as hailing, e.g., from the Baja California-California borderlands, the Arizona-Sonora-Sinaloa region, or the west Texas-Chihuahua region—may render them vulnerable to rival organized crime groups in other areas of Mexico. For example, linguistic markers and cultural knowledge associated with Los Angeles compound vulnerability in Tijuana. Nonetheless, the outsider identity of a Los Angeles-identified person in the Gulf city of Matamoros is readily identifiable and may incur additional scrutiny by organized crime groups who have alliances with Texas-Chihuahua mafias and prison gangs that rival California-Baja California mafias and gangs.

Deportation engenders multiple adverse, long-standing effects. Deported people encounter the disorientation of forced displacement while simultaneously enduring the traumas of dangerous migration journeys or immigration detention centers. Those deported after living in the United States, moreover, experience the separation from loved ones and home communities. In addition, northern Mexico presents unique harms for deported people, who struggle to secure work, housing, and healthcare; face discrimination as visible outsiders; and navigate the vulnerabilities of extortion and violent victimization. These vulnerabilities are compounded by social identities that render individuals particularly marginalized, such as those of long-time U.S. residence, gang affiliation, or injection drug use. Despite efforts to mitigate hardships, the consequences of deportation are injurious, even deadly, to deported people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tobin Hansen, PhD is a cultural anthropologist and Instructor of Social Science at the University of Oregon's Clark Honors College. Hansen received fellowships from the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego and the Social Science Research Council. He has also received research support from a Wenner-Gren Foundation grant and University of Oregon grants from the Center for Latina/o and Latin American Studies, the Center for the Study of Women in Society, Global Oregon, and the Center on Diversity and Community. He is co-editor, with María Engracia Robles Robles, of *Voices of the Border: Testimonios of Migration, Deportation, and Asylum* (Georgetown University Press, 2021).

APPENDICES

Table 2: *Worldwide U.S. Government Deportations by Decade*⁸³

Decade	Removals	Returns	Expulsions
1890s	21,031	N/A	X
1900s	97,406	N/A	X
1910s	218,411	N/A	X
1920s	271,157	60,846	X
1930s	197,913	96,123	X
1940s	143,167	907,042	X
1950s	153,413	4,403,341	X
1960s	90,976	1,083,976	X
1970s	239,673	6,830,949	X
1980s	220,822	9,658,590	X
1990s	788,096	12,934,850	X
2000s	2,580,745	10,574,754	X
2010s	3,641,269	2,035,412	X
2020s*	327,052	354,680	1,277,844

* = FY 2020 and FY 2021

Table 3: *U.S. Government Removals and Returns to Mexico, 2012-2021*⁸⁴

Fiscal Year	Removals	Returns	Totals
2012	300,469	132,446	432,915
2013	306,875	88,382	395,257
2014	265,022	72,718	337,740
2015	232,415	40,646	273,061
2016	236,593	37,314	273,907
2017	181,994	39,630	221,624
2018	208,123	42,202	250,325
2019	202,810	49,517	252,327
2020	149,309	32,176	181,485
2021	54,138	36,269	90,407

NOTES

1. Many other subgroups encounter particular vulnerabilities. For example, gay and pansexual people, nonbinary and trans people, differently-abled people, etc. all face particular social stigma and difficulties experiencing deportation. The situation of these groups deserves attention by those with specific expertise.
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